

School Liaisons: Bridging the Gap Between Home and School

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Abstract

Involving families in their children's education is not only a legal requirement in special education, it also predicts academic achievement, social and emotional development, and a variety of other positive school outcomes for all children. Unfortunately, school-home relationships often have been ignored or underdeveloped. Disconnections between home and school may be especially acute in urban areas where school personnel may not understand the culture of the students and families with whom they work. In the Indianapolis Public Schools, a large urban school district in the Midwest, efforts to better connect families and schools are occurring through the implementation of a school liaison program. The school district set out to deliberately create this program in order to bridge the gap between schools and families, with particular attention given to parents from diverse backgrounds with children who are receiving special education services. The initial intent was to allow participating families to drive the design of the program, and it appears that the district has been successful in achieving this objective. Program services and activities include conflict resolution, cultural brokering, direct support, and referral. The design of the school liaison program is described and the activities and skills of the liaisons are presented through the voices of the families that this program has served during its first year of operation.

Key Words: parents, family involvement, special education, liaisons

Introduction

An extensive research base that supports the involvement of families in their children's education is emerging. A growing number of studies confirm positive associations between parent involvement in schools and academic achievement, as well as with children's social and emotional development (Baker & Soden, 1997; Catcambis, 1998; Epstein, Clark, Salinas, & Sanders, 1997; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Fan & Chen, 1999; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Henderson, 1987; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fenrich, 1999; Jeynes, 2005; Shaver & Walls, 1998; Starkey & Klein, 2000; VanVoorhis, 2001; Westat, 2001). In urban settings, Jeynes contends that relationships between academic achievement and parent involvement hold across gender, race, socioeconomic status (SES), and academic ability of students; these positive relationships demonstrate statistical significance not only for overall academic ability, but also for GPA, standardized tests, and other academic measures (Jeynes). Given such findings, along with current pressures on schools (e.g., No Child Left Behind; U.S. Department of Education, 2001) to reduce achievement gaps and enhance the academic achievement of all students, it is important for public schools to actively seek and increase authentic forms of parental involvement. Cheney and Osher (1997) noted, "school districts will need to build structures that support teacher efforts to collaborate with each other and family members" (p. 5).

Unfortunately, teachers may not see school-home collaboration as a legitimate educational function. It is ironic, given the association between parent involvement and academic achievement, that educators do not spend more time building relationships with families. However, research demonstrates that teachers often lack professional preparation for working collaboratively with families and also view themselves as less competent in this area when compared to other professionals such as nurses and social workers (Bailey, Palsha, & Simeonsson, 1991). The lack of capacity for adequately preparing professionals in family collaborative models (Duchnowski, Kutash, & Friedman, 2002) may be especially acute for teacher preparation programs. For example, Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, and Lopez (1997) examined teacher certification requirements across the United States and concluded that teacher certification standards did not place family involvement as a priority. They found little substantive coursework and few authentic experiences during teacher education programs for working with or even just communicating with parents. Thus, teachers may not be capable or willing to pursue relationships with caregivers that could lead to the enhanced educational performance of their students.

Additionally, there are a variety of other barriers that also need to be confronted if school-home collaborations are to be developed, including time

constraints that affect both families and schools, parent and teacher uncertainty about their roles, cultural barriers, and uninviting school environments for parents, either actual or perceived (Ballen & Moles, 1998). These challenges may explain why Dunst (2002) reported that schools generally do not endorse family-centered approaches and that parent involvement often is overlooked, ignored, or treated superficially; for example, parents are often welcomed as volunteers in classrooms, but excluded from more substantive involvement, such as curriculum and budgetary decisions. Therefore, in this paper, we provide a review of relevant literature related to family involvement in schools, describe an existing school liaison program that was designed to overcome traditional school-home disconnections, and present a theoretical model (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997) as a framework to describe the positive impact this school liaison program is having, vis-à-vis the voices of families it serves.

Special Education and Family Involvement

Historically, the field of special education was designed to require and promote a substantial level of family involvement in the educational processes of students with disabilities. This intent was largely put into place through legal mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Since the inception of special education, the system has sought to comply with legal mandates by investing an inordinate amount of time and effort in creating formal notices, formal meetings, and legal documents, all of which are aimed at parental involvement. Paradoxically, however, parents frequently emphasize their preference for informal rather than formal communication (Stephenson, 1992; Turnbull & Winton, 1984). Harry (1992) confirmed this, finding parents were more likely to be engaged when communication between parents and special education professionals was informal. This notion of “formalism” in typical communication between parents and special education professionals also has perpetuated the overuse of technical language, hierarchal relationships, and one-way communication, all of which serve to relegate parents to the role of recipient of professional judgment versus empowered participants in their child’s education (Stonestreet, Johnston, & Acton, 1991; Turnbull, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 2000). Moreover, Boyd and Correa (2005) describe “parent education” (i.e., teaching parents how to parent) as a common practice within the special education system that serves to further dichotomize relationships among school professionals and parents. Such approaches assume and focus on parental skill deficits, rather than recognizing parents as valuable contributors to their children’s education. To the contrary, parent intervention programs, even for caregivers who might benefit from specific training in parenting skills,

are more effective and better received when such approaches are strength-based and family and culturally centered (Browder, 2001).

Family Involvement in Urban Education

Schools that serve families living in urban areas face unique challenges in establishing and maintaining active family collaboration. Factors such as “non-discriminatory” assessment, given the complex effects of poverty, ethnicity, and limited English proficiency, have perpetuated feelings of disenfranchisement from the educational system, particularly for culturally diverse families (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Kozol, 1995; Reyes-Blanes, 2002). Similarly, despite the fact that urban schools enroll almost twice as many students from African American and Hispanic backgrounds, as well as a larger percentage of students with limited English proficiency than schools in non-urban areas (Schroth, Pankake, Fullwood, & Gates, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1996), the percentage of urban educators from minority backgrounds is decreasing (Schroth et al.). This lack of representation of cultural perspectives in education serves to further alienate diverse families from a system already viewed as extraneous and bureaucratic (Reyes-Blanes). Additionally, education level and SES can negatively impact low-income minority families because their cultural values and beliefs can be vastly different than the Caucasian, middle-class professionals with whom they must interact (Boyd & Correa, 2005). On the other hand, families from culturally diverse backgrounds with higher socioeconomic and education levels often are more comfortable and proficient in navigating the special education system (Harry, 2002). This may be due in large part to possessing a larger degree of “cultural capital,” a concept defined by Nieto (2000) as the power that results from how closely aligned one’s cultural beliefs, values, language, and so on are with those of the dominant group that sets cultural standards. In U.S. public schools, the cultural standard continues to be set by a middle class that is typically Caucasian, even in areas heavily populated by people from diverse backgrounds.

Despite potential barriers to educational participation and sometimes strongly held assumptions about family involvement, recent studies confirm that urban families, including minority families, offer unique supports to their children (Compton-Lilly, 2000; Jeynes, 2005; Nieto, 2000) and are as active as majority parents and suburban families in their children’s education (Catsambis, 1998; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Ho & Willms, 1996; Keith & Keith, 1993; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Sanders & Hertig, 2000). In fact, families in urban settings possess the capacity to positively influence their child’s education to a greater degree than school professionals have previously acknowledged. Additionally, research indicates that families with low incomes respond readily

to targeted supports (Baker et al., 1997; Mathematica, 2001; Shaver & Walls, 1998; Starkey & Klein, 2000; VanVoorhis, 2001; Westat, 2001). Schools also may not recognize that families from minority backgrounds may prefer culturally based sources of support such as what is offered from churches or through connections with extended family (Boyd & Correa, 2005; Roger-Dulan & Blancher, 1995). Hanline and Daly (1992) reported that many African American families view more formal sources of support as ill-informed and insensitive to the unique culture and additional stresses of minority families in American culture. Therefore, to capitalize on the unique supports and characteristics of urban families and to expand opportunities for families to navigate and participate in the educational system, schools must ensure that the supports provided to families are strength-based and culturally grounded (see, e.g., Anderson, Meyers, & Somers, 2006).

Effective Strategies for Connecting Schools and Families

Henderson and Mapp (2002) examined 16 studies on effective strategies for connecting schools, families, and communities and offered an all-encompassing conclusion: Programs and initiatives focused on building respectful and trusting relationships among school staff and families are effective in creating and sustaining family connections with schools (p. 43). Sound connections among key stakeholders, including families, begin with positive relationships. For example, Payne and Kamba (2001) surveyed 210 schools and reported that "...when the 30 most highly rated schools were compared with the 30 poorest, a battery of questions about the quality of relationships (teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-parent) proved to be one of the best predictors" (p. 5). Another key finding from Henderson and Mapp indicated that programs successfully connecting with families are welcoming and address specific needs. For example, families of children with disabilities may require emotional, informational, and material support, which taken together can be termed "social support." However, studies indicate that families with children who have disabilities tend to have smaller social support networks (Herman & Thompson, 1995; Kazak & Marvin, 1984); yet when these families were provided access to social supports, results suggested improved outcomes for both children and families (Dunst, Trivette, & Cross, 1986; Singer et al., 1999).

When families were asked to prioritize their needs, they emphasized the need for relevant information (Bailey, Blasco, & Simeonsson, 1992; Turnbull & Ruef, 1997) free of technical language, provided by a credible source, and presented in the home language (Harry, 1992; Ruef, Turnbull, Turnbull, & Poston, 1999). This parallels another key finding from Henderson and Mapp (2002): Programs that successfully engage diverse families recognize, respect,

and address cultural and class differences. Studies confirming this finding have suggested the use of “cultural mediators” or “cultural brokers” who (a) are representative of the families’ cultures, (b) succeeded in the educational system themselves, and (c) can help families interpret and navigate the educational system (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000; Kirschenbaum, 1999; Lynch & Hanson, 1998; Mitchell, Janes, Essig, & Shipp 2003). These roles also have been referred to as family liaisons or school liaisons (Hermanson & Hoagland, 2002); the latter is used in the remainder of this article. Because of the limited research examining the school liaison role, researchers have suggested that this role, its function, and importance need to be studied further (Chrispeels & Rivero).

In an effort to add to a small but emerging body of literature about the importance of school liaisons, a program recently implemented in Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS), a large urban district in the Midwest, is described. This paper presents the district’s journey in its efforts to better connect families to schools through cultural brokering and a liaison program. The identification of critical program components, activities, and the requisite skills of the liaison role were gathered from a review of documents, interviews with key stakeholders in the district, and input from the families participating in the program.

The School Liaison Program in Indianapolis Public Schools

The Indianapolis Public School district is an urban system that serves over 38,000 students. The current student population is approximately 58% African American, 28% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic, and 3% self-identified as Multi-racial. The Hispanic population in IPS has more than doubled in less than seven years. Approximately 77% of families in the district receive free lunches; another 12% qualify for reduced lunch. Of the families living within the district, 24% live below poverty level, with 28% reporting less than a high school education; slightly more than 55% of the students in IPS live in single-parent homes. Additionally, IPS provides special education services for slightly less than 20% of its student population, or approximately 7,500 students.

Program Description

The school liaison program initially was designed to serve primarily families from African American and Hispanic backgrounds, as representative of the school district’s demographic composition, and specifically, families of students either identified with disabilities or at-risk for such identification. According to IPS personnel, the district was not having success in addressing needs through the use of existing community and state agencies that are in place to support families. Therefore, grant money was secured by the IPS Department of Special

Education and Student Services so it could develop and pilot its own program. As originally conceptualized, program outcomes were defined broadly to focus on increasing parental engagement in the education process and developing parent advocacy skills. This broad definition was chosen deliberately by the district's special education administrators who wanted both the program design and services to emerge based on the needs and desires expressed by families.

Currently, the IPS school liaison program employs two liaisons, one representative of African American culture and one of Latino culture. Although their previous experience with special education was limited, both women were selected because of their extensive experience in urban community engagement. One of the liaisons hired had previously been employed as a juvenile probation officer in Texas. After immigrating to this country from Nicaragua, the other liaison had been actively involved in community organizations that helped other Latinos/Latinas negotiate life in this country. Additionally, both liaisons had experience being parents and one had previously navigated the special education system as a parent in another state. The two liaisons were provided with a variety of initial training experiences including national conferences and professional workshops, intended to provide knowledge about the special education system and their unique roles as liaisons within that system.

Family referrals to the school liaison program originate from various school personnel, including principals, teachers, special education supervisors, and the school liaisons themselves. In order to develop more explicit procedures for this process, personnel were instructed to first refer families to the regional special education supervisor of their area (the school district has used five regional special education supervisors, each connected to a high school and its feeder schools). These supervisors would then make the formal referral to the liaison program. Initial contacts by a liaison to a family were made via a telephone call requesting a face-to-face meeting, which typically involved a home visit. The initial meeting served to inform parents about the program and allowed families to formally accept or reject program services. Liaisons then made themselves available via phone and pager to work individually with each family.

In the first year, the liaisons provided services to over 150 families from 59 of the school district's 80 schools. These students exhibited a varied range of disabilities including orthopedic impairments, autism, mild and moderate developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, communication and hearing impairments, emotional disabilities, multiple challenges, and other health impairments. Of the families, approximately 46% were African American, 33% were Hispanic, 19% were Caucasian, and slightly more than 1% were identified as Multiracial. These figures suggest that the program is meeting its intended goal of targeting families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Review of the Program

In the summer of 2005, IPS contracted with the Center for Urban and Multicultural Education at the School of Education at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis to conduct focus groups in order to better understand the perspectives of families who had utilized the school liaison program. Twenty parents involved with the program were purposefully selected and invited to participate, with attention given to representing the range of race/ethnicity, family structure (single- or two-parent home), and the age, grade level, and disability category of the children. Because the two IPS liaisons had established a level of credibility and trust in their relationships with the families served, the liaisons were asked to extend the initial invitation to families to participate in focus groups. Ultimately, 15 women and 4 men accepted the invitation.

To accommodate varying schedules, a morning focus group and an evening group were scheduled. The morning group included 10 family members and the evening group included 9 family members. Of these 19 participants, 47% identified themselves as African American, 42% as Hispanic, and 11% as Caucasian, with 66.7% reporting to be single-parent families and 33.3% reporting to be two-parent families. Regarding their children, 10% attended secondary schools, 53% attended elementary schools, and 37% were enrolled in early childhood programs; children represented included the following disability categories: autism (23%), emotional disabilities (22%), learning disabilities (16%), communication disorders (16%), mild cognitive impairment (11%), moderate cognitive impairment (11%), and multiple disabilities (1%). In each focus group, we strived to create an atmosphere that encouraged family members to share their experiences, including both interactions with the liaisons and services that had been provided. To facilitate full participation of families who were Spanish-speaking in each focus group, an individual translated both the questions posed by focus group leaders and the responses of families in Spanish and in English to promote full inclusion of all families and to allow each participant equal access to the perceptions and ideas shared by others to stimulate their own thinking (Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). When translating parent responses from Spanish to English, the translator repeated the response in Spanish to allow for parent clarification and/or correction before providing the English translation. Additionally, the translator transcribed the taped focus groups in Spanish and English, which subsequently allowed researchers to member-check (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) with families to ensure accuracy.

Additionally, a review of written program records was conducted. As expected, because program services were not predetermined, but rather emerged

in response to the needs of families referred to the program, the services provided by the liaisons during the first year of the program were extremely varied. For purposes of the review of the program, all services provided to parents by the liaisons were compiled through a records review and then categorized into one of the following types: (a) conflict resolution, (b) cultural brokering, (c) direct support, and (d) referral. Conflict resolution was defined as activities that liaisons engaged in with families that were in direct response to situations of conflict between the families and their schools. Examples of conflict resolution included coaching parents through verbal interactions with school employees, attending formal and informal school meetings at the families' request, and assuming the role of an informal mediator between families and schools. Cultural brokering described activities that assisted marginalized families in navigating and/or interpreting the middle-class cultural paradigm from which most public schools currently operate. These activities included translation and facilitating parent access to information to promote skill development that would enable parents to advocate for their children within the special education and public school system. Direct support was defined as activities designed to meet the basic emotional or physical needs of families, including emotional encouragement and/or assistance in accessing food, clothing, transportation, or medical care. Referral activities occurred when parent liaisons connected families to district programs or other community agencies such as parent support groups, respite care, and so forth. Each of these program activities can be matched to the broadly stated outcome of the school liaison program: the development of informed families who are engaged in their child's education process. We next describe a model of parent involvement through the voices of some of the parents who participated in the school liaison program.

A Model of Parental Involvement

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler proposed and have subsequently demonstrated empirical support for a theoretical model of parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). This model purports three psychological constructs – parents' motivational beliefs, parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement, and parents' perceived life context – that are used to understand why parents become involved in their children's education. This model suggests that parents' motivational beliefs are comprised of role construction (what parents believe they should do) and self-efficacy (what parents believe they can do) within the context of their children's education. The second construct, perceptions of invitations for involvement, incorporates

the idea that the degree to which the school community welcomes, values, and expects parent involvement is related to their child's education outcomes. Third, parents' perceived life context suggests that parents' time and energy, as well as their skills and knowledge, affect the level and type of involvement parents have in their child's education.

In the following sections of the paper, these constructs are used to provide a framework for describing how the IPS school liaison program supports parents in its ongoing encouragement of school involvement, while simultaneously working to ameliorate barriers to increased parent involvement. Information gathered from the focus groups provides the context for the program descriptions presented.

Parents' Motivational Beliefs

This construct includes both parental role construction and parental sense of efficacy. Role construction is defined as parental beliefs about what they are supposed to do relative to their child's education, as well as the subsequent behavior patterns tied to these beliefs (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2005). Self-efficacy is defined as a parent's belief that their engagement in their child's education will result in the desired educational outcomes (Bandura, 1989; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Uniquely critical to the participants in the IPS program is the notion that both role construction and self-efficacy are shaped by the personal educational experiences of parents, including their own prior experiences as a student, as well as previous and ongoing experiences engaging in their own children's education (Hoover-Dempsey et al.). Most of the parents participating in this program reported not only negative educational experiences as former students, but also failed attempts to navigate the public school educational system, and more specifically, the special education system. However, since role construction and self-efficacy are shaped by the influence of relevant social groups and personal beliefs (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), they are socially constructed and, therefore, can be positively altered. Recent studies confirm the idea that role construction for involvement can be subject to change in response to deliberate intervention (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Drummond & Stipek, 2004). Additionally, self-efficacy theory (Bandura) suggests that not only is parental self-efficacy affected by personal successes in achieving desired outcomes related to their child's education, but also by the observed success of other parents and/or encouragement from credible others.

Focus groups provided feedback from parents suggesting that program activities positively influenced both parental role construction and self-efficacy. These activities were derived primarily from the categories defined as direct

support and cultural brokering. While parents reported receiving emotional encouragement from the liaisons as well as from a parent support group led by one of the liaisons (direct support), there is also clear evidence of the liaisons providing assistance to parents in interpreting and navigating the special education system (cultural brokering). Specifically, when asked about their general experiences with the school liaison (sl) and the program, each of the following responses was offered from a different participant to evidence this:

The only person that has a close idea is someone that has the same problems come up...so when you have such a group of parents where you are comfortable and talk about your problem or what you are going through and they can actually understand it because they've been there.

She's (sl) a good role model. She's a big encourager, you know, "You can do it." You can actually get this child over this hump. We are looking forward, we are seeing the picture; the way things can be.

Like I said, we're parents, this is new to us; there was a lot of things we didn't understand because our parents, they wasn't involved in school... she helped us and we made our mind up we were going to be involved.

She (sl) let us know that we had power, instead of putting your child in what they did. I kept putting it into someone else's hands, just hoping they would test him; but they just wanted him to make friends...If I had known then...she (sl) lets you know that you have some say-so.

And you know I really believe that she (sl) understands my situation, because she told us, remember she told us, "I had a child who was going through the same thing ya'll are going through."...She knows it's stressful, because she had a child the same way.

Parents' Perception of Invitations for Involvement

Invitations to get involved from the school community strongly influence parents' initial decisions to be involved, including both type and level of involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The authors' revised model (Hoover-Dempsey et al.) lists three sources of invitations for involvement that parents will identify: the school in general (school climate), teachers, and students. This model recognizes that student invitations may be implicit, rather than directly expressed, occurring when parents observe their child's experiences with school. Because the IPS school liaison program mainly serves parents of children with identified disabilities, liaison activities focus largely on parents' perceptions of invitations from the school in general (school climate) and specific invitations from their child's teacher(s).

The Comer School Development model (Anson et al., 1991; Comer & Haynes, 1991) purports that school climate, particularly the positive attitudes of school personnel characterized as welcoming and respectful of students' families, is especially critical to parent involvement and to empowering socially marginalized families. Similarly, with regard to teacher invitations, consistent parent contacts from teachers of students characterized as "high risk" have been positively linked to parental involvement (Kohl, Lengua, & McMahan, 2002). Again, testimony from the parent focus groups illustrates a reduction in parents' negative perceptions of school climate (general invitations) through program activities categorized as conflict resolution, while liaisons also assisted teachers with initiating specific invitations and maintaining on-going communication with parents. During the focus groups, parents who described negative experiences with their child's school that prompted their initial involvement with the liaison program were asked to explain specifically how the liaisons were able to help them develop more positive relationships with their school. Several examples from different parents are provided:

And inviting her along to meetings and stuff, I've been to meetings that I had to just go off, but before I go off, she says, "Now calm down, calm down and hold up, hold up." But she's doing it in a respectful way. I said, "But you don't know, these people 'bout to make me mad, you know this ain't working." ...and I'll tell you something, you dissen' about my son, I ain't talking to nobody. You know what I'm saying. But she is back there, I got to hang in there for her, she's just a lovely person... Since she's been working with me and my child, my child is better in school and things, you know, home life, yeah it is.

But she's (sl) gonna make sure that things are did the right way. Not all the times I be being right, but it's you know, about being fair. She won't be on one side, 'cause I'm the parent. She'll get with both sides of the table...she helps us come to an agreement. She helps all of us. All of us.

Some of them, I don't know why they be teachers. I don't understand it, 'cause they don't take time out to even call and talk to you... But you have to call them. Or she (sl) have to call them or come up there...it shouldn't have to be like that all the time. They should take time out to call you and let you know what's going on with your kids in the room.... I know we all are human, we all different people, but when you got a job, a position, you need to be on the same level, especially when they dealing with somebody's child...communication makes everything better, but we've come a long way. I used to have those problems, but we've come a long way.

Now I get a note every day, saying what he did in school and sign my signature on it. And when I don't understand something, I tell them to call me...like she (sl) always tell us, "If we work together, we can't lose." You know what I'm saying. If you pulling this way and I'm pulling that way, we ain't never gonna get nowhere. But when we all work together, everything's gonna pull together. We can't lose.

So, three days we went up there to pick him up, he wasn't in his classroom. They didn't call us to tell us they was having trouble with him at school...the principal she call me in her office. She said, "Your child is slow, he doesn't deserve to be in kindergarten, he's only five years old. I can't understand why they included him, he should still be in the special needs room."...the next day I kept him home from school and I was going to take him out of IPS and place him somewhere else because I just didn't think that was right. I told them to take him out of that teacher's room and everything and they gave me her (sl) number. Well, I was already not trusting the school because of how they had treated me from the beginning. The principal at that school made me feel like, "This is my school, this is how I run my school and as for special needs children, I start them in this room right here." She (sl) helped me calm down so that I could listen and get things in place.

They would send my son to the office and wait on me and wouldn't even let me go in the classroom...I even went down to get the thing to volunteer; they would not let me volunteer at that school. When I went to talk to the principal, they would not let me see the principal....Not one time. And then I said, "I want to get along with the school."...and that's why I got involved with (sl). I told her, "Why ain't there something...why can't the parents be involved?" I want to be involved with my child and know what's going...I'm not blaming the school...and so I took a job to be a traffic guard at that school....And now when I got to be a traffic guard, I got to see him (the principal) more than once.

Parents' Perceived Life Context

The third construct of the Hoover-Dempsey model (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) suggests that parent involvement is comprised of parents' perceptions of their available time and energy and their knowledge and skills for involvement. However, Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005) acknowledge that socioeconomic status (SES) and family culture are other potential constructs. Although SES does not predict parental involvement (Catsambis, 1998; Compton-Lilly, 2000; Gutman & Midgley,

2000; Ho & Willms, 1996; Jeynes, 2005; Keith & Keith, 1993; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Nieto, 1996; Sanders & Hertig, 2000), its influence can limit access to resources that facilitate parent involvement such as flexible and/or predictable work hours (Weiss et al., 2003) and poses higher risk for debilitating stress and depression (Kohl et al., 2002; Weiss et al.). Additionally, families from diverse cultural backgrounds, who may be marginalized by mainstream culture, may experience the resource limitations associated with lower SES and language barriers. Such families also may feel disenfranchised and experience very limited power relative to a public school system they view as largely bureaucratic and often at odds with their own cultural/familial values (Boyd & Correa, 2005; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Lawson, 2003).

To reiterate findings from the program review, during the first year of the school liaisons' work, 46% of the families who participated identified themselves as African American, 33% as Latino, and 1.5 % as Multiracial. In addition, although no specific measures of SES were utilized, the liaisons characterized virtually 100% of the families they serviced as eligible for free and/or reduced lunch and textbooks. Consequently, many program activities categorized as direct support, cultural brokering, and referral could be directly linked to factors related to SES and family culture that influenced the life context variables (time, energy, skills, and knowledge), as presented within the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model (1995, 1997). When parents were asked what other kinds of help or assistance they received from the program, many responded with reports of services that they viewed as having a positive impact on various life-context variables related to SES and family culture. Responses from nine different participants are presented:

Uh, they sent her an email or something to where they asked her to come and help me with my son...he needed glasses, because he was having a problem in school with looking at the board and reading and this, that, and the other at school. And uh, so I didn't know nothing about it, but they bought him some nice glasses. And she (sl) helped participating in buying, helped him with, you know, getting him some glasses. And she took us to the appointment. She called me and made sure I had somebody to keep my kids while I take him to the appointment. She came and took us and sat there with me, talked to the people with me and with him to make sure his glasses fit him. And then we couldn't even get his glasses the same day, so she came back to take me the next day to go get the glasses for him. And I said, you know most people that's working for the school, they usually don't just take time out to do that. I mean she calls up to check up on you, even if you don't have no type of appointment, and you know, to see if there's anything she can do to help.

Our oldest son, he had a learning disability...And so he took some tests, ...and they explained it to us, but we still didn't really know how to deal with it. Well I need a dictionary to understand what they were telling me, 'cause I mean, because when they go through those tests, I didn't know what they were talking about. I mean it took her (sl) to really break it down to explain it...you know, explained it to us in layman's terms, and she helped us get on the right track on how to deal with his problems. So if it weren't for her, we'd be totally lost. She showed us how to get all our kids registered so they could go to the same school...She helped explain it to us and we got our kids on the right track and we are happy.

You know just, she's a wonderful person. If it wasn't for her, there are some things I couldn't cope with. I'm a single mom. Not only about my child, I could talk to her about problems I have...And I can call her on the phone at 7 a.m. in the morning and she always returns my call and stuff. If I ask her, "would you be here?" It's never no. It's never no. And uh, I have had people work with me with IPS, but I never had nobody take up the time and have the patience that she has for us. And she's a very loving person. I don't know what I would ever do without her...cause there ain't nothing better out there to me.

I'm thinking maybe we need more people for the Spanish-speaking. I'm Mexican, I come from another country. I don't understand the schools. I want to know what can the school do for my child. She (sl) takes me by the hand and she say, "this is your school, this is what they should do for you. These are your rights." I want to know everything, and she tells me much, and you know, all in Spanish. She tell me everything she knew with my son, what is good for my son.

It takes a certain person to have the skills to do what she (sl) does. Not just any person can do it. She's very caring and she's very knowledgeable and I have a lot of confidence in her. I have gone to other groups and sat in meetings, but I've never had the personal contact that I have with her (sl). (Translated from Spanish)

She cares for all of us, and not only for the handicapped and the sick. I have a 16-year old daughter and she just came to me and said, "Mommy, I don't want to go to school any more." She (sl) came and said, "Look, you have to go to school, you have to mature, you have to study." And now she says, "Mommy, I want to study." She (sl) came with some college papers for us...she got the papers without having to do it, and she cares for many people and I'm grateful to her. (Translated from Spanish)

There are some things that the school offers, but I never knew anything about it and my children were there for the past three years, but she (sl) found out about it and she got me in at the last day to sign up for it.

Well, since I started (in the program) we got some information... You know, things like that are available, that you don't even know about... Even the summer camps, which is a big problem in the summer. There are always things for my other kids to do, but we have to find a sitter for our other son, but she gave us information on camps.

The parents want to talk to the teachers and sometimes you go to the teacher and you ask about the problems and explain this to me. You say you don't speak English, and they say, "well here we speak English." So it's good to have someone who can be a liaison and be in the middle to translate or be there for you without feeling like it's your responsibility to do something by yourself. Also it's good to have someone who has a good spirit, who's happy and smiling, because when someone is too serious, you feel like...well, she doesn't make you feel like you're putting a burden on her. (Translated from Spanish)

Discussion

Indianapolis Public Schools deliberately set out to create a program that would bridge the gap between schools and families, with particular attention given to parents from diverse backgrounds who have children receiving special education services. While preliminary outcomes for the school liaison program are based on descriptive and anecdotal information, the power of parent input in this work is clear. Our conversations with parents who participated in the school liaison program validated the initial vision of the district to be family-driven, not merely family-centered (Osher & Osher, 2002). This vision is evidenced by program components and activities that have been defined by expressed parent need versus professional desire to "educate" parents (Boyd & Correa, 2005). By exploring this emergent program's activities and services (i.e., conflict resolution, cultural brokering, direct support, and referral) through the lens of the parent involvement model developed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), a framework for understanding how this program has positively impacted both parents and schools is emerging. Current evaluation efforts are underway to more fully identify how this program functions and for whom and under what conditions school liaisons are most effective. The goal of the school district is to develop a program that continuously examines and improves itself. Recently coming under new leadership, IPS has started an initiative to put parent liaisons in every elementary school to serve all students.

Of equal importance to the development of the school liaison program is how the liaisons actually conduct their day-to-day operations. Clearly, critical elements in the development of positive relationships among parents and school professionals involve culturally responsive and effective interpersonal communication and empathy. When specifically asked about what made their experience with the liaison successful, parents explicitly emphasized personal qualities that were effective in developing a deeply personal relationship as opposed to one that was merely professional (e.g., “compassionate,” “trustworthy,” “positive,” “it’s more than a job to her,” etc.). Although research examining the unique role of school liaisons is limited (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000; Hermanson & Hoagland, 2002), our work as well as other research findings suggest at least two critical attributes of effective liaisons: cultural responsiveness and community connectedness. The first attribute is encompassed by the term *cultural broker*, first introduced by Delgado-Gaitan (1996) to refer to a Caucasian educator who – because of his long affiliation with a Latino community – was able to interpret majority ethnic and cultural standards for the community, and subsequently applied by Chrispeels and Rivero (2000) to describe instructors selected for an intervention program for Latino immigrant parents. The application of the term *cultural broker* to the role of the liaisons in the IPS program parallels the application by Chrispeels and Rivero, in that the instructors (a) shared similar background and life experiences with the parent participants, (b) had succeeded within the U.S. public education system, and (c) could interpret this system for the participants. However, we have applied this term on a broader level to encompass an urban culture that is defined perhaps more by SES and communication barriers, which includes a lack of familiarity with professional/education terminology as well as languages other than English, than by race or ethnicity.

Admittedly, we found that the school liaison representative from a Latino background was particularly effective in working with families who were Spanish-speaking; however both liaisons were able to successfully engage urban families with racial or ethnic backgrounds that differed from their own, as evidenced by the families who participated in the focus groups, as well as the racial/ethnic breakdown of program participants that was derived from program files. Both liaisons had previous life experiences and backgrounds similar to the families they served in terms of SES and urban community engagement. This relates to the second attribute which implies that bridging the gap between families and schools is best accomplished by persons that have an intimate knowledge of the community in which the families they serve live (Ford, 1995; Hermanson & Hoagland, 2002). Although neither school liaison has had prolonged engagement in the IPS community, their background in urban

community engagement and their ability to access both formal and informal community supports and resources suggests an awareness of the importance of being knowledgeable about the community in which their client families live.

Final Thoughts

Although we acknowledge that the family experiences and thus the program activities are unique to IPS, this program description and the actual voices of families who have participated in the program can provide educators, other professionals, and any individuals interested in better connecting schools and families the chance to think critically about their own endeavors to bridge family-school gaps in their own communities. Empowering families moves us beyond solely providing opportunities to be heard, requiring the organization to listen and respond to what is being said. IPS has created a program to do just that. To quote one IPS parent, "I just want other parents to be treated equal. You know, because a lot of them would be neglected. Hopefully, it can help other parents besides myself, you know what I'm saying? Get, you know, justice, you know, get justice like we have."

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