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University/Community Partnership to Support Low-Income Immigrant Families: A Shared Responsibility Model for Early Childhood Education Settings

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Abstract

The Preschool Family Support Initiative is a collaboration among low-income immigrant families, their neighborhood preschool, community agencies and organizations, and University faculty and students. It was designed to create a network of support for preschool children's early learning and development. The Initiative developed in the context of an on-going University/community partnership called the Urban Alternative. This article describes the framework of partnership within which the collaboration developed, the processes involved, and the impact of this collaborative effort from the perspectives of the participants.

University/Community Partnerships

An important goal of university-community partnerships is to initiate or improve programs and conditions to better serve members of a community and to develop models to improve similar programs over time and in other communities (Denner et al.1999). Within a university-community partnership framework, both the university and the community have the potential to benefit from the relationship. University researchers use theoretical frameworks to explore research questions within specific community contexts, gaining valuable information not only by gaining access to the given community but also by involving members of the community in the development, monitoring, and evaluation of programs serving the community (ibid.). With university involvement, including grant-writing efforts, and through collaborative efforts to identify needs and effect change, communities can garner resources to initiate and improve programs that meet the needs of its members.

Although this "Who benefits?" framework is useful for some purposes, our commitment to partnership is more aptly described using a moral framework, as

described by Sockett (1998, 76): “Partnerships, at any level, have to be seen first and foremost as moral frames within which individuals meet, work, and establish common purposes, not as pragmatic political treaties between institutions.” Sockett also identifies four levels of partnership, based on an analysis of trust, described in terms of the range and depth of agreements and relationships among partners involved in a given endeavor:

1. Service relationships, where an individual or unit volunteers support.
2. Exchange relationships, where the parties exchange resources for mutual benefit.
3. Cooperative relationships, where parties plan together and share some responsibilities.
4. Systemic and transformative relationships, where the parties share responsibility for planning, decision-making, funding, operations, and evaluation of activities, and where each partner/institution is transformed through the relationship (Sockett, 1998).

The Urban Alternative is a university/community partnership whose members strive to work at the fourth level.

The Urban Alternative: A Shared Responsibility Model of Collaborative Partnership

The Urban Alternative, a partnership between George Mason University and six other public and private nonprofit organizations, was started in 1994 to transform public and private systems through collaborative efforts to plan and implement school-community and family education activities based in neighborhood multilingual outreach centers. The Urban Alternative involves as equal partners: individual leaders and residents in the community, staff and participants from local governmental agencies and community nonprofit organizations, and faculty and students from the University. The goals of the Urban Alternative are (1) to enable community members and grassroots organizations to have greater influence over the decisions that determine their future; (2) to build a range of partnerships among private and public organizations and individuals with the focus on the improved quality of life among the individuals and groups in the neighborhood; (3) to assist in the development of a coalition that advocates for the poor, the immigrant, the refugee, and the politically less powerful; (4) to enable George Mason University to participate positively in these partnerships and coalitions, and, at the same time, enrich the learning of its students and the teaching and research of its faculty; and (5) to establish a model that realizes these goals and influences the development of similar models elsewhere in Virginia and the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.

The Urban Alternative has established itself as a prominent and trusted action program and advocate for the poor and immigrant citizens in Columbia Heights West and south Arlington (just outside of Washington, D.C.). Among its activities, it has: (1) established a community-based preschool in partnership with Arlington County to

provide high-quality educational experiences for preschool-age children and their families; (2) provided many community development small grants to individuals, groups, and neighborhood organizations to improve the neighborhood, such as a self-help refugee group, a community closet, soccer clinics, youth leadership workshops, and a teen photographers project; (3) opened a computer center for adults, youth, and families that teaches courses from basic keyboarding to data base programs and has placed three students in an office work training program out of its first two cycles; (4) provided direct services and counseling to residents in employment, education, immigration issues, social services, and housing; (5) created a series of family-based activities, such as family literacy classes, leadership training workshops that include various family members, and computer classes for families; (6) influenced the development of a community center in the neighborhood so that community interests were protected; (7) facilitated the development of similar collaboratives in other south Arlington neighborhoods; and (8) encouraged the increased participation of George Mason University in Columbia Heights West (e.g. experienced-based courses taught in the neighborhood, professors working cooperatively with residents in the development of joint activities, numerous volunteers and service-learning students).

The Preschool Project and Family Support Initiative

The Urban Alternative's community-based preschool project was initiated by the first author to work with low-income families, community agencies and nonprofit programs to create and extend access to educational opportunities in the immigrant communities of South Arlington. A specific goal of the project was for these groups to work together to identify needs and establish relationships and programs that would empower parents to fully participate in and support their preschool-age children's early education and development. The Arlington Mill Community Preschool was established in 1997 in the new Arlington Mill Community Center to provide a high-quality, low-cost, neighborhood-based preschool program for children in the primarily immigrant Columbia Heights West community. The Urban Alternative's vision for the preschool was twofold: (1) to provide a strong foundation for children's learning and development by supporting early emotional, social, and intellectual development, and family literacy; and (2) to bring parents into a closer relationship with schools and teachers by emphasizing communication, by creating opportunities for parents to take active roles in the classroom, and by helping to connect parents to educational and training opportunities and other community resources. For the first four years, the preschool was funded through grants from the Meyer Foundation, the Graham Fund, the Marshall Foundation, and the Arlington Women's Civic Association and through partial support from Arlington County. Starting in 2001, the Arlington County Board agreed to include the base costs of the preschool in their budget. The Urban Alternative then turned its attentions from a focus on program operations to a focus on further developing family support activities in collaboration with families, preschool staff, and other community organizations.

A Rationale for Family Support

There is convincing evidence suggesting that parent involvement and support in children's early education are crucial contributors to children's academic and developmental progress. Studies have demonstrated effects of parent involvement on school readiness for at-risk children (Denton 2001; Marcon 1999), including links to children's literacy development (Bryant, Peisner-Feinber, and Miller-Johnson 2000). While studies suggest that parents' early intellectual support is linked to their children's academic success, parent involvement in preschool activities also appears to influence a child's liking of school (Hutsinger, Krieg, and Jose 1998). In fact, Head Start's comprehensive service plan for preschoolers suggests that parent involvement and family support are key strategies for program success (Mallory and Goldsmith 1991).

Particular obstacles influence the learning experience of many immigrant children in American schools (Garcia 1997; Genesee 1994; Guerra 1998; Igoa 1995), not the least of which are literacy and communication barriers that prevent parents and teachers from working collaboratively to support children's learning. Especially where families also experience economic hardship, efforts involving parents, schools, communities, and universities to overcome these barriers can play a significant role. Through this "collaboration in an enabling community," children and parents may find a way out of poverty and illiteracy (Bruner 1996), and teachers gain a greater understanding of and appreciation for the family's home language and culture (Gonzalez and Darling-Hammond 1997).

McCollum (1996) and others have identified communication barriers that work to undermine collaboration between parents who are immigrants and the teachers of their children. There is an absence of mutual understanding: language differences often leave parents frustrated or embarrassed about their inability to make themselves understood. Teachers often have expectations of parents that are not reasonable given the parents' educational experience, literacy level, and sense of alienation in the school environment. Finally, parents may resist traditional attempts by teachers to "change" them instead of valuing them. It seems that when attitudes reflect an ethnocentric bias (the notion that one's view of the world is inherently "right"), communication, understanding and children's learning are likely to be further limited and undermined. The Urban Alternative's family support initiative was a collaborative endeavor that developed over time to address these barriers in the context of the preschool project.

A Family Support Initiative: Planning, Funding, Decision-Making, and Operations

As members of the Urban Alternative, George Mason University faculty Elizabeth DeMulder and Leo Rigsby initiated a project in collaboration with families involved in the Arlington Mill Preschool, preschool staff, and community organizations to create a supportive network of relationships and learning opportunities for young families in the community. Through reflection and discussion with University partners and preschool staff, parents identified specific needs, including support for communication

between home and school, increased access to and involvement in the preschool, and continuing educational opportunities. While over the course of the previous four years these needs were informally and somewhat sporadically addressed through the efforts of Arlington County and the Urban Alternative, it became clear that what was needed was a more systematic approach that would require additional funding. University partners sought and received funding through the United Way Foundation's Success by 6@ program to put supportive relationships and programs in place to improve communication and mutual understanding and to offer educational opportunities geared to parents with small children. The Preschool Family Support Initiative was created and has four components:

1. A series of meetings were arranged so that parents, University partners, preschool staff, and members of community organizations would have a forum to assess needs, plan, make decisions, and evaluate activities. University partners and the bilingual family support coordinator (see component number two) facilitated communication and discussion at the meetings. These meetings were audio taped for documentation and research purposes.
2. A bilingual Family Support Coordinator who lived in the community was hired to work with families, preschool staff, and related programs to facilitate and encourage communication, to help parents find community resources, and to help parents support their preschool children's developing social, emotional and intellectual development.
3. A Parent Assistant Program was implemented, providing a small stipend for parents to regularly work in the classroom.
4. A series of workshops and courses for parents and other community members was arranged in response to particular interests and needs identified by parents.

At the beginning of the 2001-2002 school year, the first parent meeting was arranged and most of the mothers of the fifteen children enrolled in the preschool attended the meeting. All of the women had very limited English skills, and most were Spanish-speaking. Parents, preschool staff, and University partners introduced themselves and talked about their different roles and expectations. University partners described the high level of partnership the University hoped to achieve (emphasizing the value of bringing all partners' strengths and contributions to the effort of supporting neighborhood children's healthy development). Some of the parents had had other children in the preschool in previous years and knew of our honest commitment to families in the neighborhood, so a level of trust had already been established. The four components of the family support initiative and the opportunities that were available at no cost to parents were described. Everyone was asked to brainstorm the ways that the Family Support Coordinator might be helpful. Many parents said that they needed help understanding forms and preschool materials and communicating with preschool teachers. Then parents were asked to identify the kinds of learning opportunities they most needed and were most interested in based on a long list of options in a survey

format. Afterward their responses were discussed. Many parents were interested in a wide range of topics, and most parents agreed on top priorities, including ESL classes, First Aid and CPR, nutrition, parenting classes, and child development classes. In many cases, parents identified challenges they faced as a result of limited English skills, as illustrated by the comments of two women in the focus group:

I always need someone to translate for me when I go to my daughter's school. I do not know how else I could communicate with the teachers if they did not have someone to translate.

My nine-year-old daughter needs a lot of help in school to prevent her from falling behind in her classes. Unfortunately, I cannot always help her. ... Also, when I registered my daughter in school I could not tell them that my daughter's immunizations were current so the school sent us to a clinic to get eight different booster shots. I saw my daughter in great pain, but I did not know enough English to make myself understood.

Parents said that activities that could be arranged to take place in the immediate neighborhood and that included children or provided childcare would be most accessible and sustainable for them. Comments by two parents during the discussion illustrate these common themes among the parents:

It's so convenient for me to take classes here at Arlington Mill because it is within walking distance of my house.

I really want to learn how to speak English so that I don't have to depend so much on my husband, but I just can't find someone to take care of my children while I am in school. My husband wants me to learn English and says that if there is a class offered during the time when one of my children is at school and if there is childcare for my other one, he says that I should learn English.

Responding to the results of the needs assessment, an on-site family literacy program was developed in collaboration with the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP), an English as a Second Language (ESL) program for adult immigrants and refugees. It was offered during preschool hours two times a week and gave parents the option to bring along their young infants and toddlers to class or to make use of the childcare program set up across the hall. Some sessions were deliberately conducted with parents and children together to further promote family literacy practices. In addition, a series of ten on-site parenting classes was arranged in collaboration with a local organization called Hispanics Against Child Abuse and Neglect (HACAN) that emphasized developing positive social and emotional family relationships. A series of nutrition classes was offered through the National Capital Food Bank to help families learn about healthy and safe nutritional practices, and a workshop on physical safety and life-saving skills was arranged through the Red Cross.

Participation

In many cases, involvement with the preschool was a family's first entry into the larger community, and this involvement became a catalyst for learning about and participating in other programs and activities offered in the community. Many parents told us and demonstrated through their participation that they were eager and willing to be involved with the preschool, to make use of other community resources, and to participate in the learning opportunities offered. However, several of the mothers and most of the fathers had other commitments and were not able to be actively involved in workshops and classes. Most of the families, however, participated in some of the parent workshops, and a core group of preschool mothers attended nearly all of the workshops, including six months of bi-weekly family literacy sessions. In addition, many community members with young children who were not members of the preschool participated in the parent workshops and family literacy sessions and sought the help of the Family Support Coordinator. For example, twenty-five non-preschool parents attended the Red Cross workshop on First Aid and CPR; more than twenty non-preschool parents attended the family literacy sessions. For many of the workshops, the bilingual Family Support Coordinator provided essential translation services. Only three parents were able to take advantage of the opportunity to work in the preschool due to other responsibilities and eligibility. However, all of the families came in contact in multiple ways with the Family Support Coordinator, who among other tasks, translated preschool materials into Spanish, explained procedures and plans to parents, and provided communication support for families (both parents and children) when they needed to interact with preschool staff and with representatives of other community agencies.

Review, Evaluation, and Documentation

In order for the partnership to assess the impact of these learning experiences as well as the other three components of the family support initiative, parents were asked during several parent meetings over the course of the year to describe their experiences and to discuss the benefits and the continuing challenges of the efforts the partnership was making. Feedback was encouraged by suggesting that one goal the partnership could have in reviewing progress was to make improvements (both to the activities and to the partnership in the short and long term) in response to what was learned. Parents were asked to describe (in Spanish) the ways in which the different kinds of support benefited their children and them. They were also asked to describe the drawbacks, the concerns, and the challenges. Specifically, parents were asked, "In what ways did the support of the Family Support Coordinator help you to communicate with preschool staff and to become involved with the preschool?" "Do you think that your communication with staff and your involvement that resulted from the support of the family support coordinator helped your children to learn? In what ways? What were some continuing challenges or barriers (e.g., to communication and collaboration)?" "In what ways are the learning experiences helping you to find social support? To get needed resources? To cope with everyday challenges?" These focus group discussions were audio taped with permission from the participants, and in some cases were

followed up with one-on-one interviews that were also audio taped with permission. Focus group and interview data were translated and transcribed. In addition, University partners and the Family Support Coordinator made periodic anecdotal notes to record and reflect on their observations.

Family Support and Participation in Learning Opportunities: Influences on Families

Through our participation and observation in focus groups and interviews and on review of transcripts, several themes emerged as prominent and significant. Those themes were: the importance of trusting and supportive relationships; the value parents placed on seeing, understanding, and supporting their children's progress; and the impact of the learning opportunities on participants' sense of control, power, voice, and competence.

Developing Trusting and Supportive Relationships

Parents reported in focus group discussions and interviews that they valued and benefited from the relationships that developed with preschool staff, among parents, and particularly with the Family Support Coordinator, Sandra.

Parents said they appreciated the efforts the preschool teachers made to build relationships with them and with their preschool children. They commented enthusiastically about the head teacher's friendly demeanor: "At the beginning of the day, she welcomes everyone by asking us how the children are doing. She hugs all the children as they come into the classroom." Some parents expressed difficulties relating to the preschool teachers, both of whom spoke little Spanish. For example, this statement was heard quite often: "Sometimes, it is difficult to communicate with teachers because of the language." However, parents expressed appreciation for teachers' attempts to communicate, saying for example, "The teacher is always asking us to let her know if we do not understand her. During Christmas I couldn't understand her, so she asked Sandra to translate for me."

Sandra served as an important and trusted liaison for many parents. Parents reported that she served a valuable role by helping to facilitate communication among parents and teachers, thus helping to develop more open, trusting relationships. Parents expressed great affection for her and described the many ways that they valued their relationships with her, as illustrated by these three parents' comments:

Some mothers have asked me how I got [my daughter] into the preschool and so I have told them to talk to Sandra and I give them her phone number...and I say don't worry, this person is really nice...if she wasn't nice I wouldn't even give them her number.

What I like about her is that she notices that if we don't come to school...she calls us and let's us know what we missed at school and she inquires about us. I don't like to depend on my husband for him to translate things for me, but because I don't know the language, I have to rely on him. When I think that those notes are urgent, I take the note to the preschool to have Sandra translate for me.

Sandra translates for me. Last week, my daughter was sick with an allergic reaction. I was afraid the school would think I did not want to send my daughter to school, but Sandra was able to talk to the teacher for me and explain the situation.

According to Sandra's anecdotal notes, most parents seemed to develop a high comfort level and trust in her. She observed that some parents seemed to feel comfortable seeking information independently, while others required greater support from her. In some cases, parents seemed to just need someone to talk to, someone who would take the time to listen and support them in their difficulties or frustrations of adapting to their new lives in the United States. As the parents who needed considerable support spent time with Sandra, she observed that they appeared to gain greater confidence. One continuing challenge Sandra described was her multiple attempts to get in touch with and support parents who tended to be out of contact with the preschool.

Parents also appreciated the relationships they developed with some of the workshop facilitators. For example:

We are also very thankful with the teacher because she is very patient because all of us are beginning to understand her more so we are learning a lot.

When parents were asked to make suggestions about ways to improve our meetings together, the following comments by two parents illustrate the general satisfaction parents had with the meetings. They each also comment on the relationships among parents, preschool staff, and University partners and gave some advice:

No, the format that you have is just fine. I like the fact that we all get to share our experiences and that we all learn from each other. Doing meetings in this format makes them very personal and meaningful to us. Parenting workshops would discourage parents to speak up.

I want to suggest that you continue to have these meetings because parents will benefit from them. Yes, don't ever stop them. I have no other suggestions other than just to tell you that you learn a lot from these meetings. I also want to tell you that you guys always had a very good attitude when talking and meeting with us. It would also be important for you to tell parents that it is extremely important for them to attend the meetings. It is important for parents to feel comfortable and to have the ability to talk with you about their children's progress. Parents like to know how their children are doing in

school, but there is often no one who they feel comfortable talking to. So, parents need to know that you all are there to inform them about their children's progress.

Seeing, Understanding, and Supporting Children's Progress

By providing opportunities for parents to learn about and be involved in the preschool classroom, parents were able to see their children's progress and see the value of the preschool experience for their children. The focus group and parent meetings provided opportunities for parents to share their experiences in the classroom and to encourage other parents to become involved. One of the women who worked as a parent assistant in the preschool classroom shared with the other parents in a focus group:

I have eight years of experience in my country working with kindergarten, so for me it has not been such a new experience. Your question about the classroom behavior of the children is normal. The program here is excellent. They have programs in art, music, and computers. I see the children's progress in social skills as well as psychomotor skills. Their language skills improve every day. It is important to keep the lines of communication open. We have children from all over who speak different languages, but they are learning to share regardless of their cultural differences. In regard to discipline, I find the classroom discipline appropriate. If children start fighting over a toy, neither of them gets to play with it.

In some cases, parents' expectations changed in regard to the involvement they would and could have as a result of the encouragement they received from the preschool and in parent meetings:

This is my first time ever having a child in school and I didn't know that I would be so involved in my child's school and in his activities. I didn't know that people would be so interested and eager to talk with me and hear my opinions. I thought that I would simply take my child to school and then go home. I was very pleased at the fact that the teacher and all of you would inform us about how our children were doing at school. Having my child in the preschool was a nice experience because I feel that he learned a lot. I also feel that all of you gave us an idea of what school in this country would be like.

I tell you this experience has really motivated me to continue to go to school meetings. For example, my child is going to summer school and there was a parent meeting at his school, which I attended. At that meeting the teachers and school staff were also conveying the fact that it is very important to be involved in our children's school. I strongly say that attending the meetings that were held at the preschool motivated me and encouraged me to continue to attend school meetings at my child's new school.

While parents had opportunities to learn about how their children were doing in preschool, it became clear in focus groups that they would prefer more information and communication about their children's progress, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Facilitator: We have had...parent meetings to give you updates on the current events at the preschool and children's progress. Since Betsy is not the only one who is in charge of the school—basically the county is—we have not had as many as we would have liked. But, of the ones that we have had, what would you say about these meetings?

Parent 1: We didn't have that many meetings. We only had about one at the beginning of the school to inform us about how our children were going to work and things like that.

Parent 2: Yes, one at the beginning and I would say only about two.

Facilitator: Do you all think that it is necessary to have these kinds of meetings more often, or do you think that it is fine for them to be sporadic?

Parent 1: Well, yes those more often.

Facilitator: What kind of information would you have liked to have had in these meetings?

Parent 3: Well, I would like to know how children are behaving, whether they pay attention—do they see our children as attentive or not.

Parent 4: And what they think of our children's progress.

Parent 5: If they fight a lot...do they throw tantrums at school and things like that.

Facilitator: So informing you about the preschool and your children.

Parent 6: I truly believe that it is very important giving parents information about their children's progress because that's one point that would be taken in parent's meetings and that's truly the parents' interests. If they tell me we are going to talk about your child's progress I will be there. But if we tell them ohh...there is a psychologist coming who will be talking about interrelations in your family...they may say okay, but don't come. However, when the child's progress is of concern in the meeting we will all be there. We will be there because...confirming what Gloria said last week...she said that she would be coming to the meeting because the flier said that they would be talking about children's progress at this meeting. So that's what interests us—everything is important...what is said in all meetings...the different themes that are talked about, but knowing that they will talk about children's progress—it is like a soft spot.

We agreed that we would try to organize more parent meetings that included updates and discussion of the children's progress.

Control, Power, Voice, and Competence

Parents reported that the different learning opportunities helped them to gain knowledge and skills that contributed to their growing confidence and competence to support their children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. They reported that

their participation in family literacy classes and parenting classes and workshops positively influenced:

- Their sense of control over their lives.
- Their developing skills and knowledge.
- Their ability to communicate with teachers and others.
- Their ability to support their preschool children's learning.

When asked about the impact of the preschool's family literacy program, parents said that it was more feasible, convenient and less stressful to learn English when their preschoolers were in school and when they were allowed to bring their younger children with them, thus affording them greater control over decision-making:

Since you are offering English classes during the day, I can stop going in the evening. Going to school during the day while my children are in school is much better for me so that they are not left alone. I really wanted to continue to go to school at night too, but I have not found a trustworthy person to baby-sit my children. I don't want to leave my children with a stranger....It makes me feel much better to know that they are in school while I am at my English classes. I think it is really nice that you are giving us the opportunity to learn English. Now I wish that all of us [mothers of children enrolled in the preschool] would take advantage of that opportunity.

Another way that you can help us is by finding a way to elevate our self-esteem. I tell you this because I see a lot of mothers who would love to learn how to speak English or learn to gain computer skills, but because they don't think that they can do it, they won't do it. These women need to value themselves and know that they can do whatever they want if they want to. I wish that you could think of a way to empower them. Perhaps offering more classes that will teach them more skills and making it mandatory for all parents to go to them would help these women realize that they can learn new skills.

Parents reported that their English skills improved as a result of the preschool's family literacy program: "I can speak a little bit of English and now that I am taking classes I feel I am making progress with my reading." As a result of their developing abilities, parents reported a greater sense of confidence and a stronger voice, as described in these two women's stories:

We went to a mall and you know every time when you want to pay for something they ask you for your zip code or your phone number. Before I wouldn't understand and I would say "What? Sorry I don't speak English." And I'm sure she [was thinking,] "How dumb. I am just asking something simple." But now that the teacher has taught us that...when people ask me and I now know how to respond. I feel good because I don't have to ask my husband, "What did she say?" Now I know.

It has helped me in that sometimes my children say something in English and then I say, “What does this mean? What does this mean?” So I feel as though I don’t know anything. But I say to myself, “No, I do know.” So it has helped me.

Parents talked about the ways that their developing literacy skills helped them to support their children’s learning and healthy development:

Now...Abraham [her son in preschool] is learning a lot and there are times when he begins to talk to my nieces and then he asks for something and so I understand when he speaks English. So I know that English classes are helping me a little bit with him to learn. And in the future when he goes to school it will definitely help me.

Well, in my case, because my children are already in school, I need to help them with their homework. Also when you go to school and speak to the teachers it is important to know how to speak English and so the ESL classes help us with all of this.

Several parents spontaneously expressed an interest in participating more frequently in English classes, as illustrated by the following focus group exchange in response to the question, “What do you think of the English classes”?

Parent 1: As a matter of fact, we would like them to be longer, having more time in the classroom in those two days than we do.

Parent 2: Yes, me too.

Parent 3: Yes, or more days.

Facilitator: More time or more days?

Parent 2: Well...if more often is not possible, I would like to have more time in the classroom in those days when it is being offered...because sometimes as soon as you get there you begin to get the hang of it, but then you have to go home because the class is over.

Parent 1: They should start right after we drop off our children at school till we have to pick them up.

In response to this and other similar feedback, the first author included requests to fund more frequent and concentrated English classes in subsequent grant proposals seeking support for families in the community.

With encouragement and support from the Family Support Coordinator and University partners, some parents became more active in the community, publicly voicing concerns and opinions about the need for additional resources for families. For example, Sandra helped preschool parents to write a letter to the County Board about the need for more preschool and childcare resources for families in the neighborhood. Several parents attended county meetings to advocate for increased resources in the new community center design to accommodate a larger, full day preschool program.

This parent described her developing knowledge about nutrition that she gained from attending the nutrition classes:

I have learned a lot! ...Where else would I learn that McDonald's food has a lot of fat and that it is really bad even for kids? Where else would I learn how to cook non-fattening French fries?

One of the parents who assisted in the preschool commented on the impact of the nutrition classes on the preschool children's eating habits:

And so we don't just think about ourselves, but we also think about the children... because here [in the United States] there are all kinds of snacks like chips, fruits, rice, yogurts—and those classes helped. At the beginning, we [in the preschool] were observing that certain children would bring chips for snack. Every day it was chips, cookies,...But with the nutrition classes children began to bring healthier snacks...like fruits, yogurts...so it seemed to me that these classes were teaching parents good healthy habits and this was translating in their behavior toward what they packed for their children's snacks.

When asked how the parenting classes might have influenced the ways they interact with their children, parents made a variety of connections as illustrated here by excerpts from three parent interviews:

It affected my child's life in that I now dedicate more time to him than I did before. Sometimes we don't dedicate time to our children. But, in these meetings I learned to dedicate some time to my children. I didn't realize that dedicating time to children would do them really good. We often just assume that play is just for children and that we should leave them alone when they are playing. Now I take the time to play or color with them. I notice that my children like the fact that I now pay more attention to them.

I learned how to discipline my child. For example, I learned that if my child breaks a house rule or misbehaves, I should not approach him with a bad attitude. I have learned that you talk with them in a nice way and you explain to them what is expected of them. I also learned how to communicate with my children about the emotions that I experience and the emotions that he experiences. I learned that it is okay for children to experience different emotions. I also learned that it is okay for children to know about the different emotions that we all experience. Before our meetings, I thought that children should know only about happy feelings; however, after the meetings, I learned that it is okay to know and express emotions other than happy feelings....Now I communicate with my children about the various kinds of emotions.

I also allow my children to express their emotions. Before the meetings, I would tell my child to be quiet and not to cry when something did not feel good to her. However, I learned in the meetings that it's okay to allow children

to express their emotions—especially when something really hurts them. For example, when my child would fall, I would say “don’t cry, it doesn’t hurt,” but now I tell her that if she wants to cry she can cry and that she will feel much better later.

Parents talked not only about changed parenting attitudes related to emotions and discipline, but about changed orientations and behaviors toward literacy:

My behavior has also changed in that now I go to the library more often than I used to. We get books for the children and I get parenting books for myself. I dedicate a lot of time to my children, but it seems that now, I make sure that we do have some time together either playing or reading a book. I like to read books to my child because I like her response. She loves it when I read books to her and I am very dramatic as I read them. You know...the last time I read a book to her she paid attention and learned all the dramatic parts of the book. The next day I saw her playing teacher with her sister. She was reading the book that [I] read to her the day before, but what was so funny and cute was that she read the book as if she knew how to read and as dramatic as I was. It is very interesting how children just love to imitate their parents.

The following excerpt from a focus group session serves to illustrate the ways that issues of control, power, voice, and competence were raised and expressed during parent meetings. It begins with a response to the probe “Describe your experience in the parenting classes. How did they help you or benefit you?”

Parent 1: Yes, [the classes] helped me to have more patience with my boy when he throws tantrums and kicks his feet around. Instead of hitting him or yelling [at] him, [I talk] to him. I thought those classes were good, but they were very often and...

Parent 2: Too repetitive.

Parent 1: Yes...too repetitive.

Parent 3: Every Friday, every Friday, every Friday and she always repeated the same thing.

Parent 2: Yes, she repeated.

Parent 1: Almost always she would repeat the same, right?

Parent 2: Yes, she always repeated the same thing....

Facilitator: So it was like why go if she will say the same thing she said last time?

Parents 1-3: Yes.

Parent 2: So it was like if it was every week or every two weeks there should have been a new theme in each session.

Parent 1: If it had been that she would have talked about a new theme each week, we would have continued to stay for the meetings, but since they were often repeated we decided to not stay anymore.

Parent 3: But, these meetings helped. They did help.

Facilitator: In what ways did they help you?

- Parent 3:* Well...like Maria said to be more patient with our children because sometimes my child gets angry—very upset—and so I would also get angry. But this taught me to deal with that anger and then talk calmly to our children.
- Parent 4:* Yes, there were some questions like if the bus would leave him [her son] what would we do the next day. So we would know what to do in that situation. So she would orient us.
- Facilitator:* So there were some aspects of the meetings that you liked and some that you didn't like. What you didn't like was that themes were repeated too much and at last you would say well I am not learning anymore. But there were some things that you found interesting and that you learned.
- Parents 1-4:* Yes.
- Parent 2:* One of the days that I clearly remember is when Mrs. Sandra was pretending to be my husband and [how] he would pull him [their son]. I really remember that day. It really helped me because I talked to my husband about not treating him badly.
- Facilitator:* Can you think of any other suggestions about these parenting classes? Would the parents next year benefit from these classes? If yes, why...if no, why [not]? How else can the parenting classes be improved?
- Parent 1:* Schedule them less often...
- Facilitator:* Why might that be needed?
- Parent 2:* Well, because sometimes we are not able to come every week. If they were more separated we would be able to come to all of them.
- Facilitator:* How often would be appropriate?
- Parent 1:* Two times a month...every other week.
- Parent 3:* I think the same. Because it had been a long time since we last stayed for a parent meeting, today we made time to stay....
- Parent 2:* We made the effort to stay today.
- Parent 4:* What I would like is that one day everything would be done...to make time for everything for one meeting...one day because there are times you have a meeting on Thursday another one on Friday...and so you are occupying the whole week too much. Sometimes one does not have the time and so this is why some don't come. One day should be...from the time you leave your child at the preschool...to the time when you pick up the child at 12:45. [This] would be good to use all that time in one day to do all of those things.

As a consequence of this and other discussions, during which it became clear that parents shared a similar perspective and common concerns about the frequency and content of the parenting classes, the focus group as a whole decided to cancel the last two parenting classes and to find a different parenting class next time that was less repetitive.

Lessons Learned

Parents reported that the family support initiative had important influences on their developing skills and knowledge that led to a sense of agency and voice in the community, to enhanced communication and collaboration, and to greater support of their preschool children's learning and healthy development. A common theme that was evident from participants' feedback was that ongoing, trusting relationships with individuals in the community were key to constructing a supportive, family-centered environment. Challenges include the continuing need to encourage supportive relationships among participants and to empower participants to take ownership of the program, so that there is ongoing commitment and continued engagement irrespective of changes in the preschool community.

The parents' ambivalence toward the parenting classes contrasted sharply with their clear preference for more meetings to keep abreast of their preschool children's progress and for more frequent English classes. It is clear that parent participation at all levels helps to ensure that activities are relevant and meaningful to those involved. Workshops and other ongoing activities must be constantly reassessed to keep pace with changing circumstances and needs, requiring continual feedback from parents.

While parents reported that they had more knowledge, confidence, and decision-making power as a result of the opportunities offered, these opportunities were sometimes described in terms of ways that "you help us," which suggests a hierarchy of authority and a sense of dependence on and subservience to those in positions perceived to be more powerful. In some discussions, parents appeared to defer to new ideas and perspectives with little integration of and reflection on what was known before, as if this received knowledge must be the only "right" way. It raises a concern that the power and authority wielded by others holds much weight for the participants and that this authority may undermine their sense of agency and confidence in their own tacit knowledge and ability to parent. This issue clearly needs to be studied further.

It is clear that the Spanish-speaking parents preferred that the preschool staff spoke Spanish. To some extent, the need for the Family Support Coordinator would have been more limited if preschool staff and parents spoke a common language. Since the majority of families involved in the preschool have been Spanish-speaking, concerted attempts were made to find and hire qualified bilingual (Spanish and English speaking) preschool teachers with no success. Both the Family Support Coordinator and the parent assistants helped to bridge communication barriers in the preschool. According to parents, the Family Support Coordinator not only offered support for communication with preschool staff, she created a stronger social support system by building trusting and nurturing relationships with and among parents and helping them to garner needed resources. As a whole, the family support system helped parents to be knowledgeable about and supportive of their children's learning and allowed them to develop knowledge and skills that gave them opportunities to be active, more powerful members of their community.

The collaborative efforts made by the partnership and the partnership's commitment to shared responsibility appear to have led to changes in individuals' attitudes and beliefs. For example, preschool staff became more intentional about including and informing parents on preschool matters as a result of their participation in the partnership. Parents became more knowledgeable and confident in their abilities to support their children's education and development as a result of their participation. University partners became more knowledgeable about the many challenges and frustrations inherent in partnerships involving bureaucratic institutions. However, there is no clear indication that the institutions themselves have been transformed as a result of the partnership's efforts. Institutional bureaucracies tend to resist alternative frameworks, particularly those frameworks that emphasize moral and ethical concerns. Social justice issues seem not to greatly influence decision-making. Because our focus was not on the ways the institutions themselves may have changed, further data is needed to consider whether the partnership had transformative influences on the institutions involved. It is clear, however, that it was the work and commitment of the many individuals directly involved in the partnership that influenced the direction, the scope, and the resulting impact.

Because one goal of the partnership was to bring the community together over a common interest and a shared sense of concern for the healthy development of the community's children, it was important to work toward building this initiative as a community-based effort. The Urban Alternative's projects will have a greater probability of long-term success with this strong community investment and commitment. The success of the preschool program and its family-centered support activities has increased the community's awareness and interest in addressing the needs of low-income immigrant families. As a result of this success and interest, the Urban Alternative is currently expanding its efforts to develop a broader base of support in the community for low-income families. The plan is to use the model described here to develop additional family-centered preschool programs and to create educational opportunities for parents of young children who may not be directly involved with a preschool program. By bringing together members of the community, county employees, and Urban Alternative members to identify the scope of needs and potential mechanisms to address them, we continue to strive toward a high level of partnership, defined by a sense of shared responsibility and held together by a growing sense of trust and by a common commitment to the work.

This model initiative has the potential to inform research, policy and programs for families with young children, particularly in low-income, immigrant communities. The study highlights the strengths and continuing challenges of developing high-level partnerships that centrally involve families in the planning, decision-making, and evaluation of programs in early childhood settings. We will continue to study changes in attitudes and beliefs, and changes in university, school and community as an integral component of this ongoing partnership.

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