



Harvard Family
Research Project



FINE Forum

Early Childhood Education

Family Involvement Network of Educators
Harvard Family Research Project

Issue 4, Spring 2002

For questions or comments about this paper,
email hfrp_pubs@gse.harvard.edu

About the Family Involvement Network of Educators: Harvard Family Research Project's Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is a strategic effort to strengthen family and community engagement to support children's learning and development. FINE brings together thousands of educators, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers dedicated to strengthening family-school-community partnerships. Members get the latest information about family involvement research, as well as the opportunity to connect with others in the field.

To become a member of FINE, visit our Subscription Center at www.hfrp.org/Subscribe

© 2002 President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced whole or in part
without written permission from Harvard Family Research Project.

Harvard Family Research Project · Harvard Graduate School of Education · 3 Garden Street · Cambridge, MA · 02138
www.hfrp.org · Email: hfrp_pubs@gse.harvard.edu · Tel: 617-495-9108 · Fax: 617-495-8594

From the Directors

April 7-13 marks the Week of the Young Child, a time when people and organizations around the country join together to celebrate the learning opportunities of young children, and to reaffirm our shared responsibilities for helping children make those opportunities count.

There are more than 35 million children age zero to eight in the U.S. These young children of the 21st century deserve the best-prepared teachers ever. Their teachers must be able to offer excellent learning environments and collaborate with parents and communities to support young children's development and learning. As we celebrate the Week of the Young Child, the FINE Forum presents some innovative ideas and practices in family involvement in early childhood education.

We now know what competent early childhood educators should know and be able to do in building family and community relationships. In Spotlight we draw attention to the University of Tennessee Talent Development Model, a model of constructivist professional preparation that cultivates the potential of students to achieve excellence in the art of teaching and partnering with families and communities.

Ensuring children's smooth transition from early education programs to kindergarten requires that attention be paid to the resources and linkages among schools, child care and early education services, and families. In Questions and Answers Robert Pianta, professor of Clinical and School Psychology at the University of Virginia, shares his recent research on children's transitions and gives tips on how to support families during this time. In addition, New and Noteworthy directs readers' attention to new research briefs on transition practices and family involvement prepared by the Harvard Family Research Project.

Parent Perspective features Maria Luz Torre and Dana Hughes of Parent Voices in California. These parents share their organizing techniques for securing high quality and accessible child care for all families. Their efforts are critical at a time when 60% of children under the age of six are in some form of early childhood education, and 64% of mothers with children under the age of six are in the labor force.

Statistics also tell us that the ethnic diversity of children in the U.S. continues to increase, but that the teacher population fails to reflect this diversity. Teacher Talk profiles a research collaboration between a university and an early childhood program in which a white teacher demonstrates how to effectively work with linguistically and culturally diverse families. Continuing this theme of diversity, in Lessons from Leaders, Nila Rinehart, Executive Director of the Tlingit and Haida Head Start Program in Alaska, shares her ideas about the role of the executive director in validating children's cultural heritage and exercising leadership in developing cultural programs that schools can emulate to facilitate children's transition.

The work of the researchers, practitioners, and parents that are featured in this issue of the FINE Forum can inform K-12 family-school-partnerships in a variety of ways:

- Focusing on experiential and constructivist learning processes

- Supporting families across school transitions
- Giving teachers a voice in action research and the inquiry process
- Producing collaborative learning environments
- Emphasizing the whole child and an understanding children's families and communities
- Valuing parents' voices and organizational leadership

Finally, we have included a Special Supplement on a recurring theme in past and present issues of the FINE Forum - the importance of practitioner research to develop and improve family involvement practices. We summarize the findings from a focus group conducted with school leaders about various action research practica in pre-K-12 focused on family involvement.

To all those who contributed to this issue, we offer our deepest thanks. To our readers, we look forward to your comments and suggestions for future issues of the FINE Forum.

Heather B. Weiss, Ed.D.
Founder & Director

M. Elena Lopez
Senior Consultant, FINE cofounder

Holly M. Kreider
Senior Researcher, FINE cofounder

Maggie Caspe
Research Analyst

Program Spotlight

Featured Model: Constructivist Professional Preparation

Well-prepared professionals are the most important contributors to quality early childhood programs. Initial professional preparation, according to Joan P. Isenberg, must provide the rigor and relevance for the contemporary realities of teaching. She explains that these realities include "teaching children from diverse backgrounds, addressing children's individual abilities, working in partnership with children's families, participating as members of interdisciplinary teams, having deep knowledge of the content they teach, and being able to articulate why they teach as they do."¹

Acquiring this deep knowledge and developing a practice that integrates the worlds of children, their families, and other early childhood professionals demand fresh approaches in professional preparation programs. One such approach is constructivism. Constructivism emphasizes that learning occurs when a child actively engages with the environment and builds his or her own understanding. It is also applied as a method of teaching for university faculty, who model it for prospective teachers. Constructivist teaching focuses on individuals building their own knowledge rather than merely receiving information from faculty members. Teaching strategies emphasize problem solving and inquiry, peer collaboration, reflection, and assessment to improve practice. Linkages with school and community resources broaden student perspectives, and provide opportunities for connecting theory and practice.

The Inclusive Early Childhood Education Program (IECE) at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville offers one example of constructivist professional preparation. Specifically, it prepares individuals to teach in urban and multicultural school and community settings and to serve young children with and without disabilities and their families.

Teachers enter the program in their senior year with a major in child development or an arts and sciences discipline. The program provides them with a minor. After completing their bachelor's degree, students continue on to complete one year of internship and graduate study to receive a Master's and dual licensure in Pre-K-4th grade and Pre-K-1st special education.

The Design of an Inclusive Early Childhood Education Program

Amos Hatch, cofounder of the IECE program that was established eight years ago, explains, "We wanted to create an alternative way of thinking about how teachers develop as professionals - alternative to the assembly line model where a student takes a series of courses and at the end expects to be a complete teacher."

The program is based on the concept that teaching, as with the development of talent in other areas, evolves through three developmental phases: discovery, discipline, and

¹ Isenberg, J. P. (2000). The state of the art in early childhood professional preparation. In *New teachers for a new century: The future of early childhood professional preparation* (pp. 15–58). Washington, DC: National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education, U.S. Department of Education.
Harvard Family Research Project · Harvard Graduate School of Education · 3 Garden Street · Cambridge, MA · 02138
www.hfrp.org · Email: hfrp_pubs@gse.harvard.edu · Tel: 617-495-9108 · Fax: 617-495-8594

divergence. The 3D or Talent Development Model replaces the traditional structure whereby students experience a series of courses. Instead, different strands of the curriculum, such as child development, inclusion, and family involvement, are woven through all three stages.

Discovery

Like an artist who first goes through a period where he or she plays with materials and explores what's possible, teachers must have time to discover and understand the different areas related to becoming a teacher.

In the discovery phase, students explore the context of the child, family, and school, and historical factors that will help them understand children's development. In this way, students gain a comprehensive understanding of a child's performance, behavior, needs, and aspirations. By addressing contexts and needs, students can take advantage of the strengths children bring. Discovery is also an important way of looking more broadly at teaching challenges such as classroom management

Vygotsky writes that culture actively constructs and largely determines both the course and the degree of developmental progress. IECE students spend much time developing a concept of the contexts in which students live in. They constantly look at their own selves, their own identity, and how others may differ from them so that they may begin to feel comfortable in connecting with families.

Gina Barclay-McLaughlin, Associate Professor at IECE, highlights a pervasive problem affecting her program and the nation's schools as well. "Fewer candidates of diverse cultures are entering the teaching force, and in turn, white teachers are entering predominantly African American urban schools and are not familiar with the culture. Discovery then is critical."

Discipline

Just as professional students of an art or a craft develop the skills and capabilities that are characteristic of their discipline, so must teachers. The discipline phase of the program provides students with experiences in schools and on campus to develop knowledge and skill in curriculum and instruction. Literacy is a strong emphasis in the program. While at the discovery level, students look at national reports on early literacy and the position statements of national professional organizations to understand what is expected of them and the children. The discipline stage fosters actual teaching strategies to accomplish literacy and learning goals.

Divergence

Eventually an accomplished artist will apprentice with a master and learn the unique qualities of his or her discipline. The artist endeavors to produce art that is new and will diverge from techniques creatively and competently. This phase begins in a teaching candidate's full-year internship at the graduate level and continued throughout his or her career.

Program Implementation

IECE offers various innovative approaches to instructional delivery, curriculum, and assessment.

1. To facilitate students' building their own knowledge, faculty employ experience-based learning and other alternatives to lecturing. Hatch explains, "we fold content that is usually taught in structured lecture format into solving real problems or closely simulated ones. In this way our students get at content and application at the same time." Along with case-based problem solving, the program emphasizes cooperative learning communities that shift the learning responsibility from instructor to everyone. Faculty use nine alternative instructional approaches that focus on knowledge acquisition through problem solving peer collaboration and assessment to improve practice. For more information on these instructional approaches visit the IECE website.

2. To engage students in the "contemporary realities of teaching," the program connects students to the worlds of children in the classroom and in the community. For example, students participate in a community-mapping project. They begin by studying children in their classroom environment. They then look beyond the classroom to aspects of the school structure and culture that support children. In the final stage of the project, students shadow a child for a day to learn about what he or she does before and after school. They attempt to capture the lives and voices of children and families to gain a broader understanding of the community.

Barclay-McLaughlin explains that community mapping changes teachers' perspectives about children. "Teachers often find that children perform differently in a community context than they do in school and are surprised at the different behaviors they see. Teachers will ride the bus, go to after school places, and have children share their own experiences and their perception of the day and community."

Through this exercise students are not only prepared to support children in achievement, but they also learn how to connect their goals with those held by the families and community.

3. To connect theory and practice, student teachers spend much time in the field in both professional development schools and other educational programs, including family resource and child development centers. One new project called Community Mentors brings together community and business leaders, teachers, university faculty, prospective teachers, parents, and retired community people to deliberate about the needs and challenges of schools in the area. In early discussions, the group identified vocabulary as one area of focus. Now, in an effort to support early literacy development, teachers and student teachers who are part of the project have begun meeting with community members and families in churches, schools, and businesses to explain the theory of classroom practices and suggest early literacy-strengthening activities among the community. At the same time, these educators gain an understanding of the culture of the community and its goals for children, which they can then incorporate in the classroom.

Conclusion

In today's early childhood classrooms, teachers find themselves required to respond to a wide range of learning styles and increasingly diverse racial, ethnic, economic, and language backgrounds. Feinburg and Mindess² write, "The principles of the constructivist model are both specific and broad; they are elastic enough, flexible enough, and broad enough to accommodate a wide range of learners and cultural styles." Constructivist professional preparation provides just one approach to build a well-prepared force of early childhood professionals. All involved in the education of teachers must continue to develop the methods that will adequately prepare teachers to work with diverse children in equally diverse program settings.

² Feinburg, S., & Mindess, M. (1994). *Eliciting children's full potential*. CA: Brookes/Cole Publishing Company.

Questions & Answers

Robert Pianta Talks About Kindergarten Transition

Transition is a key component of school readiness. Studying the continuity between early childcare programs and elementary schools can enhance understanding of academic, social, and emotional adjustment during a period that sets the tone and direction of a child's early school experiences.

Robert Pianta is a professor of Clinical and School Psychology at the University of Virginia. He is a principal investigator on the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development and a senior investigator with the National Center for Early Development and Learning. He co-directs the center's research program on children's transition to kindergarten.

Q: Can you describe some of the research you've done on children's transition to kindergarten?

Robert Pianta: Our perspective on transition is one that tries to emphasize the assets that exist for children. There is no more important context than the family in a child's life and how that family relates to the schooling experience is very important to a child's development. During periods of transition, relationships between school and home are more important than they might be under other circumstances. In our research we try to document these relationships and understand the way they function. We have approached our research by valuing and validating what parents have to say about their transition experiences.

Q: What are some of your research findings?

Pianta: One of the things that we continually hit upon in our research is that in the early childhood years families feel welcome. They feel connected to the schooling enterprise. That shifts tremendously when they go to elementary school. We're starting to understand some of the mechanisms that occur in that shift. In elementary school there is a formalization of contact with families. Communication becomes restricted, constrained, and driven by the school. We must find a way to continue to value what families have to say and use this as a starting point in our efforts to connect schools to families.

Q: Based on your research, what messages would you want to give families so they feel affirmed in maintaining this connection with their child's school?

Pianta: We must stress that it's very much worth persisting in contacting the school and staying in touch as a child makes a transition. A family's sense of connection to the school is going to undergo a shift. What once felt welcoming and inviting might become more scheduled and less individual. Also, parents should know the school is an environment that is more likely to be in touch with them or invite them to be in contact after concerns

have been raised, rather than before. Elementary schools approach things differently than early childhood programs. Teachers have many more kids to deal with in a given classroom and there are fewer professionals whose job it is to specifically focus on families. Parents' efforts to do things like take their child on a visit before schools starts are likely to help break down barriers and help them and the child feel more comfortable in the school.

Q: What are some of the other "breakthrough" ideas in early childhood education research that parents should know about in terms of getting kids ready for school?

Pianta: In terms of research on literacy, we know in a much more detailed way about the very specific skills that are important for children as they learn how to read. The way a parent calls attention to the children's skills, talks with them about their experiences, and makes sure the child enjoys reading is critical. These are the kinds of experiences that parents have control over that contribute to their success in school.

The other piece we are learning is that the kinds of experiences children get in an early childhood education program contribute to children's readiness for school, but relative to what happens at home these programs are icing on the cake. Most of the hard work in getting children ready and having the skills to be successful in school resides in the experiences they have at home. I think for a long time we hoped we would see programs compensating for what happens at home, but there is not a lot of evidence of that.

Q: What is the best way to have this information communicated to parents so that they can internalize the information and adopt the practice?

Pianta: This is one of the great roles for early intervention programs. They must provide and sustain the kind of support and modeling needed to reduce stress for parents and provide clear strategies in their interactions and relationships with their children. They can't do it through pamphlets and books. It must happen through real opportunities to interact with providers. The role of the larger community goes hand in hand with this. The more a community recognizes how important what goes on in families is, and how much parents require support in their role, then the more resources get mobilized across the board to accomplish it.

Q: How does the research on kindergarten transition relate to those that occur from elementary to middle or middle to high school?

Pianta: There's a fair amount of information on the transition from elementary to middle school. One of the big differences is that children have a lot more responsibility for managing that transition in middle school to high school than they do in entering kindergarten. But the same issues prevail. That is, how do we manage to transmit

information and relationships across these institutional barriers? That is the fundamental question in transition.

Q: How can teachers best be prepared to support the transition to kindergarten?

Pianta: Teachers in training must not just deal with children in classrooms, but they have to spend time with children and families. They have to get to know the family the child comes from through fairly structured experiences. One of the things we do in our early childhood and elementary school program here at UVA is to have students complete a semester practicum designed to provide a conceptual and theoretical framework about family development. Over the course of the semester they do interviews and other applied experiences with their target family. It is critical that teachers understand families and have a broader sense of child development before the kindergarten years.

Q: How can you best evaluate family involvement in transition programs and what are outcomes of successful transitions?

Pianta: One of the things that we've learned is that outcomes are not going to be so clearly tied to the way we traditionally think about child outcomes. I wouldn't necessarily think that children's scores would be higher for example. First, I would look for a parent's sense of connectedness to the elementary school and the quality and quantity of that connectedness. That serves as a resource for the child as they go forward.

Second, I would expect to see lower rates of special education referrals. Many times the mechanism of routing children into special education is a default for not having a decent strategy for handling concerns when they come up. Finally, I would look for a shift in the tone of the formal contact between the teacher and the family. You would expect to see communication that is less formal, more positive in terms of social and emotional tone, problem-solving focused, and collaborative.

Suggested Reading:

Kagan, S. L., & Neuman, M. J. (1998). Lessons from three decades of transition research. *The Elementary School Journal*, 98(4), 365-379.

Kraft-Sayre, M. E., & Pianta, R. C. (2000). *Enhancing the transition to kindergarten: Linking children, families, & schools*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, National Center for Early Development & Learning.

Pianta, R. C., Cox, M. J., Taylor, L., & Early, D. (1999). Kindergarten teachers' practices related to the transition to school: Results of a national survey. *The Elementary School Journal*, 100(1). University of Chicago.

Pianta, R. C., & Cox, M. J. (Eds.). (1999). *The transition to kindergarten*. Baltimore: P.H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.

Pianta, R. C., & Kraft-Sayre, M. E. (May 1999) Parents' observations about their children's transitions to kindergarten. *Young Children*, 54(3).

Rimm-Kauffman, S., & Pianta, R. C. (2000). An ecological perspective on transition to kindergarten. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 21, 491-511

Rimm-Kauffman, S. E., & Pianta, R. C. (1999). Patterns of family-school contact in preschool and kindergarten. *School Psychology Review*, 287, 426-438.

Parent Perspective

In the United States, 60 percent of children younger than the age of five spend part of their day in the care of people other than their parents (Education Week Quality Counts 2002). Research shows that reliable, high-quality child care is critical to children's health, intellectual development, and school readiness. Yet, for many working parents access to excellent child care is out of reach. Poor and low-income families are disproportionately affected by irregular and shifting work schedules, marginal employment, and the financial necessity of relying on unstable and lesser arrangements.

Parent Voices, located in Alameda, San Francisco, and Contra Costa County in California, is a parent-led, parent-run grassroots organization fighting to make quality child care affordable and accessible to all families. The organization combines leadership development, advocacy, and community organizing in its efforts to increase funding, improve quality, and provide better access to child care. Parent Voices is coordinated by the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network and hosted by the Resource and Referral agencies in each of their respective counties.

Maria Luz Torre, a cofounder and organizer of Parent Voices in the San Francisco Bay Area, and Dana Hughes, a parent leader and apprentice organizer, share their story-based advocacy approach with FINE.

Maria Luz Torre:

Our organizing centers on families telling their stories to policymakers. There are always statistics, but they do not speak with the same compelling force as stories do. My story is similar to many of the parents who volunteer and work with us. When I started Parent Voices six years ago I was a stay-at-home mom. I had a college degree, but was still at home on welfare because I couldn't find child care. I wished there was something I could do and knew that other parents had to be feeling the same way.

Today Parent Voices advocates for child care issues on both the local and statewide level and develops parents into community leaders. On the local level we do outreach to parents who are not aware of their rights to child care, give them information, and get them involved in advocacy for their children. On the statewide level our actions have been a big part of convincing our governor to maintain funding for child care.

We train our parents in a number of different ways, but I think the most powerful training is going out there and doing it. Spending one day at City Hall with a new parent volunteer, listening to other parents tell their stories, is more valuable to me than just one day of leadership training. Many parents feel apathetic and ineffectual. There's the feeling that they won't make a difference. Once they sit in and participate, it's empowering.

More formally we sponsor an annual action training for new members. Parent leaders facilitate the discussion and workshops on what to do when you are lobbying. Beyond this, we have partnered with other advocacy organizations in the San Francisco area like the Center for Third World Organizing, Bay Area Organizing Committee, and the

Berkeley Media Studies Group. We don't shy away from sending parents to other organizations' trainings. Collaboration is good. Why reinvent the wheel?

At the same time, though, we acknowledge that this kind of work is not for everybody. Some parents are natural leaders and want to get out there, but there are other ways to get involved. Every family can make a phone call, write a letter, or write a story on a postcard.

For example, in one written campaign this year, we collected family budget profiles and pasted them on the back of postcards. On the front of the postcard was an actual picture of the child. A lot of groups write postcards, so we wanted to be different and be visible. Pictures of real live kids are hard to throw away. At the same time, parents love the idea of their child's picture being sent to the governor. That's one of the creative ways of getting parents involved. We have one parent who sent a letter to former President Clinton and received back a letter from Hillary acknowledging its receipt. One story about one mother's difficulty in getting quality child care went a long way."

Dana Hughes:

I'm a single mom with five kids. When I got involved with Parent Voices I was experiencing a lot of issues with getting child care and keeping it. I was working at the school and some parents approached me about coming to a meeting. I began to see how important parent involvement was and how important it is to our kids and our community. I then started going to City Hall. When I heard some of the comments that the politicians were making I started to cry. They just didn't care. When people who don't live in your community make decisions over your life, they make bad decisions. They base their decisions on their life, not the real situation.

I see it now as my duty as a parent from the inner city to go up and talk to our legislators and tell them what's going on over here. The media can tell you all kinds of things, but when so many people confirm the same story about child care over and over again, we paint our politicians a picture and get legislative progress. My role is to go out and reel parents in, get them to shoulder up, mentor them, and let them see that they have just as much right to make decisions as anyone else does.

My tip for other parents is to pick a concern close to their heart, find an advocacy agency that's working with that concern, and get under its wing. Decisions are made by those who show up.

For more information contact:

San Francisco County
Parent Voices - San Francisco Chapter
445 Church Street, Suite 117
San Francisco, CA 94114
Tel: 415-276-2941
Fax: 415-392-2399

Teacher Talk

Early childhood educator, Susie Kruger, teams up with Professor Rosalinda Barrera and doctoral student, Shawyn Williams, at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign to understand literacy development among diverse young children.

Teacher Research in The Early Childhood Setting

How can a white monolingual English-speaking teacher best serve and support linguistically diverse children? It is this very question that Susie Kruger brought to her graduate advisor Rosalinda Barrera at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign four years ago. Their early conversations sparked a research partnership that is still evolving today. Their work is illustrative of the importance of teacher research in the early childhood setting, the benefits of teachers and researchers working together, and the power of a socially responsive teacher in working with diverse families.

Barrera and Kruger have been involved in a research collaboration investigating:

1. Effective teacher practices in a pre-k and kindergarten classroom
2. The literacy development of three and four year old Latino children
3. How literacy as a social activity fosters student relationships and enhances student learning

Over the past two years Barrera has followed Kruger and a number of her children from the early intervention classroom setting to the larger context of the public school kindergarten classroom. Kruger's current kindergarten class has 10 Latino children, 11 African American students, 1 Japanese student, and 1 Vietnamese student. Through videotaped classroom footage and home visits with families, the team has collected data that challenge stereotypical ideas about children from diverse and low income backgrounds.

Barrera comments, "I wanted to learn about teacher practices that are effective in cultivating child-directed learning and literacy. I'm finding that a teacher is crucial for this to happen. He or she must be enthusiastic, respect kids, establish long terms relationships with families, and have a real constructivist philosophy. Kruger embodies all of these things."

Teachers and Researchers Working Together

Practitioners who collaborate with academic researchers can acquire the skills needed to formulate problems skillfully, investigate them in meaningful ways, and share the work and recognition of writing about or presenting their findings professionally. Teacher - researcher collaborations are symbiotic and increase both the teachers and researchers' understanding of the work they do.

For Barrera, the research has become a source of academic and scholarly data as well as a valuable teaching tool for incoming pre-service teachers. Barrera shows videos of

Kruger's classroom in her teacher training classes. She spends class time role-playing situations, and talking about second language learners and literacy across cultures.

Barrera comments, "Since our teacher preparation students are predominantly white women, it's important that we prepare them to effectively partner with students of all families. And it's important that they see such a powerful role model doing this effectively."

For Kruger, Barrera serves as a sounding board and a native Spanish-speaking resource. In addition, the research has deepened Kruger's role as a teacher researcher. She comments, "I'm a co-researcher. That's different than just having a professor come into your classroom and do the research. I've always felt comfortable with people coming into my classroom. I teach kindergarten now, but I was trained in an early childhood lab school where people would come in all the time to observe. With Rosalinda it's different. I'm a part of the research." Their collaboration is based on trust, comfort, and mutual respect for one another's opinions.

As the project grew, the two decided to invite doctoral student Shawyn Williams to join the team. Williams comments, "Bringing in an African American woman sends a strong message to the kids. They are now seeing an African American woman, Latina woman, and Caucasian woman working together in harmony. It's important that kids see people of color in powerful positions, seeing how often we discuss and cooperate and respect one another."

Socially Responsive Teachers Working with Diverse Families

A socially responsive teacher is one who is socially conscious, has affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, sees herself as responsible for bringing about change in school equity, understands how learners construct knowledge, knows about the lives of their students, and builds on students' current knowledge (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). These qualities are crucial in forging partnerships with families.

All three researchers stress that parents and families are a big part of the work they do and emphasize the need to bring different customs, traditions, and languages into the classroom in a comfortable and respectful way.

Kruger explains, "I work with my parents in the same way I work with my research team. Asking parents and respecting their opinions counts so much. It is so important for me to let the parents know that they are the child's first teacher and that they know the child better than I do. From the very beginning we try to form a working relationship. I want to hear the stories about their child. Anything a parent feels is important for me to know, I want to know. For my ESL students, I let the parents know that they need to continue to speak to their child in their first language at home. The stronger and richer their first language, the easier English will come. Parents need to hear teachers say this so they know we value their culture and language."

Williams, who is following a number of the African American pre-K children who moved to different district kindergarten classes says, "You can't address literacy development without addressing who the child is out of school. Children don't exist in a

vacuum. We must look at who is around them and weave this throughout their classroom experience."

One way Kruger brings families into the classroom is through her literacy curriculum. She encourages parents to read to their children and build on their children's oral language. She emphasizes the importance of talking and singing with children throughout the entire day. She also puts on classroom theatrical productions of different stories such as Three Billy Goats Gruff, La Gallina Roja, and a rap of The Three Little Pigs. Through multi-language performances and experimentation with different language styles, parents have the opportunity to celebrate children's success and gain a better understanding of the overall classroom philosophy.

Kruger elaborates, "I really want parents to be in my classroom. At the beginning of the year a lot of parents are uncomfortable because of past experiences so it's my job to start off overly friendly. I try to make them feel comfortable, begin to build trust and respect, and let them know I want the best for their child. I tell them from the beginning this is their classroom too. If they're in the neighborhood and want to come by, I let them know that they are always welcome to see us anytime. And I believe it."

Through working with families, this project has transformed Barrera into an activist researcher. She has begun to question more deeply how to advocate with parents and how to support them in taking more politically active roles in schools. She is continuously addressing her role in making research accessible to parents, schools, and the public to promote informed dialogue and effective action that will raise the quality of education for all students.

Reference:

Villegas, A.M., & Lucas, T. (2002). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: Rethinking the curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53, 1.

For more information contact:

Professor Rosalinda Barrera
Department of Curriculum & Instruction
University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign
rbarrera@uiuc.edu

Lessons from Leaders

Nurturing the Gift That Each Family Brings

Nila Rinehart, Director of the Tlingit and Haida Head Start Program in Alaska, shares her ideas and strategies about the role of the executive director in supporting children and families in early childhood settings.

Build your program on community and cultural strength

We must know and understand the community we are serving. Try to build your program from within. You can't just place the organization on top of people and their cultures. Information and structure must flow up from the families. When you go from inside out you are able to grasp onto what a community really believes about kids. Then they take ownership and are validated that their practices and historical record of raising healthy children matters. Additionally, when serving at risk populations, the tendency is to see only deficit and that is dangerous. It is enough that the broader community thinks badly of our communities, we do not need to perpetuate the myth. Show your community and the broader society the strengths.

Make parents part of the program mission

A leader must be clear about his or her organization's philosophy and set the tone for what the role of parents should be. An organization must be able to specify how it will serve families and be clear about why it is doing this.

Serve as the organizational hub

The executive director is critical to any early childhood program. One of our primary roles is being responsive and aware of what's happening in the field so that we can leverage this research and practice for our own program development. Another key responsibility is to provide a strong management infrastructure so that the essential planning and evaluation systems are in place to support programming. I think of myself as a hub and I'm creating an infrastructure to weave children and families throughout my program.

Honor parent knowledge

In tribal communities, honoring spirituality and ancestral strength is very important. We honor that our elders are valued for their traditional parenting skills. So, we took a different approach to our parenting classes and based it on a historical perspective. We interviewed elders about traditional child rearing practices and found that our traditions matched current theory and practice. Our parenting classes demonstrate how we experienced parenting long ago and how that is still true today. We insert information when it isn't there naturally, but work to reinforce and validate what's already there. We

provide a real balance between tradition and current thinking about parenting and child development.

Create mechanisms for parents to be program leaders

In order to be responsive to parents' needs, programs must create mechanisms and structures for family involvement. Parents should be involved in designing products and services, and evaluating and governing the organization. In our Head Start, there is a high regard for including our families in the decision-making structure and oversight. We establish relationships with families and nurture their leadership. Seventy-five percent of our staff are parents we served in the past. Many come from challenging backgrounds, but manage to use our services and learn new skills.

Produce relevant materials for dissemination

Parent education materials must speak to families. Examples and suggestions must be close to their day-to-day experiences. We develop our parent information, such as videos, with them and with the community. We give more than just information from the expert, but it's information from the heart. We let parents know about developmental milestones and changes, while focusing on the values and issues that parents want to focus on.

Support parent and children's transition to kindergarten

Research suggests that the ethnic composition of children's preschool matches that of the child and his or her family, but often kindergartens are much more diverse and heterogeneous. When we think about children's readiness we deal with issues of social change, cultural oppression, and language. Coming to terms with the societal issues is hard in many communities and it plays out in success factors for kids in school. We instill in our families a strong sense of culture and identity.

Link to public schools

We have a responsibility to link with public elementary schools and let them know what works in our program and what they can do to maintain the base we've set. For example, we instituted a traditional language enrichment program in our Head Start. The public schools have recognized that this is part of successful programming for Native American families. In turn, a few schools have implemented a K-3 language immersion classroom. Schools are following our lead. They are not just bringing community to the classroom as a token, but are creating classrooms around community values and languages.

Foster a learning organization

A strong early childhood program will have a staff that is constantly learning. Teachers have planning time and professional development opportunities. A good percentage of our budget goes to staff development and training, and when credentials are obtained staff are rewarded by salary increases.

Be intergenerational

Grandparents are the bridge between the strengths of the past and what the future is. All family members are an influence on children's development and we try to emphasize this. Also, we impress on our families the importance of the male role; fathers, grandfathers, and uncles all need to be involved with their children's education.

To learn more about the program or receive an order form for any of the Alaska Native Home Base videos for parents and caregivers of infants, small, and preschool aged children please contact:

Nila M. Rinehart, Ed.M.
Director, Tlingit & Haida Head Start
Central Council Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska
320 W. Willoughby, Suite 300
Juneau, AK 99801
907-586-1432
907-463-7316

New & Noteworthy

From the Harvard Family Research Project:

Bibliography on Family Involvement in Early Childhood Education

This bibliography, now in the FINE Resource section, contains selected research journal articles, books, and reports from 1999-2002 relating to family involvement in early childhood education.

The Transition to Kindergarten: A Review of Current Research and Promising Practices to Involve Families

This review of current research on the transition to kindergarten focuses on promising transition practices, the role of schools, and the involvement of families.

Getting Parents "Ready" for Kindergarten: The Role of Early Childhood Education

This research brief presents preliminary evidence that family involvement in young children's education may contribute not only to a smooth transition to elementary school for children, but also helps parents remain involved in their children's learning in school.

From other sources:

Analyzing the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions

Funders and implementers of early childhood interventions are becoming more interested in comparing the benefits their programs produce and the costs they incur. This report offers general guidance for performing such analyses. It includes case studies such as the Starting Early Starting Smart (SESS) program of the Casey Family Programs.

Learning from Starting Points: Findings from the Starting Points Assessment Project

This report by the National Center for Children in Poverty reflects the issues and challenges of trying to deepen links across early childhood, child health, and family support activities through systems change, program enhancement, and community mobilization strategies.

Promising Practices Network on Children, Families and Communities

This website provides links to short summaries and syntheses of research findings organized into five topics: healthy and safe children, children ready for school, children succeeding in school, strong families, and self-sufficient families.

School Readiness Project

The School Readiness Project, sponsored by the University of Wisconsin, is helping Wisconsin communities develop local coalitions linking people and organizations concerned about young children and their families. These collaborative processes serve as a catalyst for community-based programs.

Using Results to Improve the Lives of Children and Families

This guide examines how public-private partnerships can best use results-based decision making. The paper also provides selected instruments to measure family functioning and parenting skills.

Research briefs on what states are doing in early childhood education

The Education Commission of the States publishes research briefs on what states are doing in early childhood education. There is a section devoted to family involvement.

Working in Child Care in North Carolina

This report takes an in-depth look at the education and compensation of teachers who care for North Carolina's children under age six that spend their day in licensed care. Findings indicate that while 82% of North Carolina's child care teachers have a college degree or have completed college course work, half of them earn less than \$16,000 a year.

School Leaders as Action Researchers

Action research on family involvement provides the opportunity to connect theory and practice, include families in the research and learning process, and for the action researcher to develop research and leadership skills. In January 2002, the Harvard Family Research Project staff conducted a focus group interview with school leaders who were carrying out action research practica as part of a doctoral program at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The National Ed.D. Program for Educational Leaders at Nova is an innovative field-based doctoral program designed specifically for practicing administrators. The six Nova students in our focus group represented principals, interim superintendents, and teachers from schools in Ohio, Florida, New Jersey, Alabama, and Pennsylvania. Each chose to focus his or her action research project on issues of family involvement in education. This paper synthesizes their experiences.

What Kinds of Learning Opportunities Does Action Research Offer?

Our focus group findings suggest that action research on family involvement can offer valuable learning experiences for school leaders. By initiating action research projects, these school leaders can:

Learn about issues of importance for school and community

The first step for any action researcher is to identify a problem, question, or concern. As "front-line" professionals, the school leaders in our focus group have access to a rich source of primary data and information, such as observations of student behavior and conversations with parents. To provide a better grasp of family involvement issues in their specific localities, they augmented these routine forms of information gathering with surveys and the formation of advisory groups. As they identified issues, they used their practica to craft solutions.

For example, one participant designed a practicum to raise teacher awareness of the home situations and personal and academic problems of black students in their classrooms. She explained: "...teachers knew very little about the students' at home [life] ... we had one child eating breakfast in class and who was sent to the office. When we found out that no one was home in the morning, we were able to adjust." To support teachers' work with black students, this participant created a strategy of home visits, parental involvement in the classroom, and staff development focused on modifying instructional practices for black students.

Learn to connect research and practice

Action research offers a tool by which educators apply theoretical models and research findings to improve family-school partnerships. A number of focus group participants

implemented Lueder's Self-Renewing Partnership Model¹ to increase home-school communication and to enhance teacher attitudes towards students and parents. Participants felt that the practicum gave them the opportunity to go beyond "lip service" about the importance of parent involvement and to translate the research base into action, which was often accompanied by the complex realities of attitudinal, bureaucratic, and operational challenges. One participant, however, pointed out that existing research lacks recommendations for practitioners, saying, "when you get to the nitty gritty of techniques and suggestions, it (the research) gets lightweight." He suggested the need to identify the necessary components of home-school connection and the techniques that support each of these components.

Learn to solicit and validate parent input and action

In action research, parents are invited to not only communicate concerns, but to engage in the solution process by taking action. This can only come about when parents' ideas are respected. One participant says, "I've learned, don't go with your first instinct. Sit down and listen to what parents are bringing to you. Sometimes we have an idea in our head, 'this is perfect for them,' but it's not what they want. So that presents a conflict. I'm learning to be flexible and listen and look at what they want, not so much what I think they need. But what they want."

Learn about what works and what does not

Participants identified five critical factors in strengthening family involvement in their schools:

1. Regular communication with parents. Such communication fosters positive relationships and also alerts school staff to potential problems that can be averted by timely action.
2. Parent "buy-in". Giving parents opportunities to become involved in decision-making creates more ownership and leads to greater participation. Family involvement cannot be done for parents, but must be done with them.
3. Purposeful involvement. Participants acknowledge that families are eager to learn and want to be involved. For them to affect student outcomes, schools must be able to focus their efforts on specific goals and provide the necessary guidance, support, and the skills to support their children's learning. For example, one participant found that parents had "outdated" frames of reference of schools' writing expectations. Families were invited to "writing nights for parents" during which parents were led through a set of activities designed to show them how to teach the writing process (according to the school's standards) to their children at home.

¹ Lueder, D. C. (1998). *Creating partnerships with parents: An educator's guide*. Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Company.

4. Inclusion of students in parent involvement efforts. One participant considers children as the key to greater parent involvement. "Use the children in whatever you do with the parents. It has to be a collaborative process with children and parents working together." This participant carried out an interest survey among students and linked their reading interests and writing projects with activities for parents as well as for teachers. In this way students, teachers, and parents participated in a collaborative literacy project.
5. Principal support. Participants pointed out that the principal is the most critical person to promote family involvement. The principal "sets the tone for the teachers and the entire building." Working closely with a principal on a family-school practicum can potentially strengthen such efforts.

Tips for Doing Action Research

Focus group participants offer the following tips for other school leaders wishing to conduct action research and family partnership projects:

- Keep your eyes on the prize. Use specific school data and research to effect large-scale change and create positive outcomes for children and their schools. Keep the research topic focused and purposeful.
- Get buy-in from teachers. Do preliminary work to explain to school staff the issues, the benefits of action research, and the importance of family involvement.
- Generate ownership among all constituencies. Get everyone onboard including the school committee, superintendent, teachers, parents, community organizations, and businesses.
- Use research and data in meaningful ways. Link programs and research to effect broader community change and participation.
- Focus on the positives. Keep communication among students, teachers, and parents positive. Highlight successes and things that the school and parents do well.
- Be responsive to families. Be flexible, take various perspectives, and respond to what families actually want.
- Build parents' capacity. Support parents' confidence and skill development to be children's teachers and understand that research can help achieve this.
- Facilitate; don't control. Orchestrate the action research vision through collaboration and partnership with teachers, parents, and children.
- Promote dissemination. Share results with the school board, colleagues, and parents.

Through action research, focus group participants have gained a greater appreciation of research and how it can help them develop family involvement partnerships as well as monitor and improve their efforts. Their experience has taught them the importance of

modeling partnership with families for teachers, principals, and school board members, and "showing hard research to back up what you have done." For them, the value added of their practice lies in professional growth, making them better teachers, researchers, and partners with families.

We would like to thank the following focus group participants for their time and insights:

- Linette Coleman, Principal of Kendale Lakes Elementary School in Miami, Florida
- Charla Evans, Interim Superintendent of Gallia County Schools, Ohio
- Ruth Ferrer, Vice-Principal of Edward J. Patten Elementary School in Perth Amboy, New Jersey
- Jerry Jones, Assistant Principal for Administration at Dundee Ridge Middle School in Dundee, Florida
- Andy Meiser, Principal of Juniata Mennonite School in McAlisterville, Pennsylvania
- Scherrine Pitts, Assistant Principal of Daphne Middle School in Alabama

We also give special thanks to Susan Graf at Nova Southeastern University for her help in organizing this group.

To learn more about the National Ed.D. Program for Educational Leaders contact:

Nova Southeastern University
1750 NE 167 Street
North Miami Beach, FL 33162
800-986-3223, ext. 8590 (U.S. and Canada)
Tel: 954-262-8590
Fax: 954-262-3906
edlinfo@nova.edu
<http://edl.nova.edu>

For further information on action research read the Teacher Talk article from *FINE Forum*, Issue 3.