

You just feed them with a long handled spoon:
Families Evaluate Their Experiences in a Class Size Reduction Reform¹

Elizabeth Graue
Denise Oen
Wisconsin Center for Education Research
University of Wisconsin Madison
1025 W. Johnson
Madison, WI 53706

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Abstract

This paper comes out of an evaluation of Wisconsin's Student Achievement Guarantee in Education program (SAGE), a multidimensional program popularly known for its class size reduction component. One of SAGE's elements is a *lighted schoolhouse* initiative that is aimed to strengthen the links between home and school. We were interested in finding out how class size reduction and family strengthening reforms come together in the experiences of families whose lives had been touched by the program. Drawing on family focus groups held at nine SAGE schools we use Bakhtin's tools of addressivity and answerability to explore how families constructed locally specific identities within particular community contexts. Family discussions focused on responding to needs: family social needs, the need for social connection, and perceived answerability felt by families for their community. We suggest that schools would be more successful in building relationships if they used the potential power promised in class size reduction programs and developed programming focused on the needs and resources of families in particular communities rather than imagining a generic, one size fits all model of parents.

A rabbi was talking with God about Heaven and Hell.

"Come," said God. "Walk with me, and I will show you Hell."

And together they walked into a room of cold, rough stone. In the center of the room, atop a low fire, sat a huge pot of quietly simmering stew. The stew smelled delicious, and made the rabbi's mouth water. A group of people sat in a circle around the pot, and each of them held a curiously long-handled spoon. The spoons were long enough to reach the pot; but the handles were so ungainly that every time someone dipped the bowl of their spoon into the pot and tried to maneuver the bowl to their mouth, the stew would spill. The rabbi could hear the grumbings of their bellies. They were cold, hungry, and miserable.

"And now," God said, "I will show you Heaven."

Together they walked into another room, almost identical to the first. A second pot of stew simmered in the center; another ring of people sat around it; each person was outfitted with one of the frustratingly long spoons. But this time, the people sat with the spoons across their laps or laid on the stone beside them. They talked, quietly and cheerfully with one another. They were warm, well-fed, and happy.

"Lord, I don't understand," said the rabbi. "How was the first room Hell; and this, Heaven?"

God smiled. "It's simple," he said. "You see, they have learned to feed each other." (Temple Sinai Congregation of Toronto)

This parable was shared by participants in a family focus group in a school participating in the Student Achievement Guarantee for Education (SAGE) program, a reform that is widely known as a class size reduction program. Designed to support schools challenged by poverty, SAGE also includes a family-strengthening component called the lighted schoolhouse that provides school based access to social, academic, and recreational services. As part of an evaluation of the SAGE program, we interviewed parents and guardians of children attending SAGE schools about their experiences in a program

ostensibly configured to enhance the relationships between home and school. In this paper we examine their articulation of their needs, the ways they offered their own resources, and their images of relationships that would support their children. These perspectives are important because SAGE's design recognizes that class size reduction is insufficient to change the opportunities of many students. Instead, the challenges posed for students living in poverty require multidimensional reforms that include the development of social networks between school and community and more intense relations between teachers and parents. This required us to focus attention beyond the classroom design a study that allowed families to be participants in creating their vision of education rather than being a target. We begin by showing how we learned about the parable of the long handled spoon in a conversation with families in an urban elementary school.

Wellstone Blvd. Elementary is a located in a Midwestern inner city. When Denise arrived at the school at 7:00 AM, the hallways were still quiet. In the office, three women were answering phones and taking care of a young child who had his head down on a table. Pauline Powers, the family coordinator, led Denise to the cafeteria where she would be talking with families. It had taken Pauline several weeks to coordinate this because she had taken seriously our request to include families with different levels of involvement, struggling to find a time that would be most convenient for families with complicated work schedules. Eventually she suggested first thing in the morning after families had dropped their children off for the day.

Soon, children lined up for breakfast, juggling their trays, coats and backpacks. Janice, the grandmother and guardian of a kindergartener, greeted each child with a smile, a kind word, and a gentle reminder to get a container of milk. Eventually, all the children were settled at long tables in the dim room and ate quietly under the watchful eye of teachers.

Denise set up a space in the back and waited to chat with those who had agreed to speak with her about what it meant to be a family in the Wellstone community. Janice finished with her daily volunteering activity and joined five others in a spirited conversation.

Toward the end of the interview the talk turned to how the school was like family:

Janice: This is just like a big family around here.

Valerie: You've got people that ain't right. You got people in your family that ain't...

Janice: Well in any family-- you just feed them with a long-handled spoon and you pray for them and move on.

The long handled spoon reference captured our interest immediately. Did Janice mean that it was necessary to keep your distance? Or was she referring to the parable of heaven and hell?

With the stories of families from nine high poverty schools in our heads, we realized that feeding members of a shared community was a choice but more importantly, a responsibility. These were not romantic families offering help to the generic needy. Families were responding to community needs, needs they had often experienced themselves.

Here are some of the stories that reminded us of the room known as heaven:

- Anna, Tamara and Trina talked about providing clothing for children in need and how they could work towards the creation of recreation facilities lacking in their rural community. Anna grew up eating mustard sandwiches. She wants it to be different for the children at this school.

In other stories the bowl was untouched because the school could not coordinate family needs with the schools goals.

- Florence wasn't able to volunteer at school when her own children were young. Yet when she signed up to be a volunteer at her granddaughters' school, she was

never called. Her quiet sadness was clear when she mentioned that the school volunteers were white. She is not.

Our participants represented parents and other caregivers, multiple languages and racial/ethnic affiliations, those living in grating poverty and those in the comfort of the middle class. Despite these diverse identities, we found that they had amazingly similar perspectives on their experiences with school. Although all the schools made efforts to reach out to families, we heard a complex mixture of success and missed opportunities. These families were passionately committed to their children's education and to their schools but they did not always feel the same commitment reflected back.

In the context of a reform designed to enhance student achievement through class size reduction and stronger relationships between home and school

- How do families in SAGE schools evaluate their experiences with schooling?
 - What needs, preferences, and resources do they describe?
 - How do these relate to the resources provided through the SAGE program?

Tools for Understanding the Connection Between Class Size Reduction & Home-School Relations

SAGE provides a unique opportunity to link diverse scholarship – the program's specific legislative focus on both class size and school-community linkages prompts attention to the literature on class size reduction and home-school relations. But more importantly, their joint consideration, which suggests that having fewer students increases the opportunities for teachers to connect with families, suggests a synergy created by the program. For this reason, we explore literature on class size reduction and home-school relations, examining the assumptions that shape research and work to make explicit the links that tie these areas of research together.

Class Size Reduction Scholarship & Policy

Class size reduction is a popular and resource-intensive reform implemented in 40 states to enhance the chances of success in early schooling. It has been linked with positive effects on student achievement (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Finn & Achilles, 1990; Glass & Smith, 1979; Grissmer, 1999) and on student attitudes and instructional practices (Bain, Achilles, McKenna, & Zaharias, 1992; Smith, 1980; Zahorik, Halbach, Ehrle, & Molnar, 2003). Comparison of class size reduction in relation to other investments have varied in their assessment, depending on the strategies used (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Hanushek, 1999; Normore & Ilon, 2006)

Class size reduction is not without challenge in implementation. When class sizes are reduced, schools need more space for instruction and more teachers, both of which are finite resources (Graue, Hatch, Rao, & Oen, 2007; Ogawa & Huston, 1999; Stecher, Bohrnstedt, Kirst, McRobbie, & Williams, 2001). These resources are not distributed equitably; the most vulnerable students often get the least space and less experienced and educated staff.

Theories of action. Class size reduction is informed by theories of action focused tightly on the classroom. One theory suggests that with fewer students, *teachers* have more opportunities for student contact, they are more likely to calibrate their teaching to student needs, and their interactions are more likely to be positive (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). A second theory, focused on student dispositions, asserts that smaller classes allow *students* to be more engaged socially and academically resulting in more learning (Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003). A third explanatory factor moves beyond the classroom to address *home-school relationships* and their potential to influence the power of class size reduction:

In the case of class size we need a *theory of classroom and home behavior of teachers, students, and parents* that explains why smaller classes might produce higher achievement in both

the short- and long-term . . . An early intervention either has to change cognitive, psychological, or social development in important ways, or change the future environments (peers, family) that affects the individual. (Grissmer, 1999, p. 23, italics added)

Given the collaborative potential for home-school relations, we can imagine several outcomes of pairing class size reduction and home school relations. With fewer students, there are fewer families for teachers to work with and those relationships can be, theoretically, more intense and informed. These more intense relationships have the potential to change essential student environments, by informing teachers of the resources, goals and intentions of families and by bringing information about schooling into homes.

SAGE Theory of action. The interviews on which this analysis is based were part of a large scale evaluation of Wisconsin's SAGE program, a multifaceted reform that includes class size reduction in grades K-3, rigorous curriculum, professional development for teachers, and closer connections with families and community. Two elements are relevant here. It is assumed that teachers will develop a *different* type of relationship with families if they have fewer students. The second is specifically delineated in the SAGE law under an initiative called *the lighted schoolhouse* that states:

1. Keep the school open every day from early in the morning until late in the day, as specified in the contract.
2. Collaborate with community organizations to make educational and recreational opportunities, as well as a variety of community and social services, available to all school district residents. ("The SAGE law," 2004)

The rationale behind this element of the law is that schools, as a heart of the community, can foster student achievement by providing vital social resources. The SAGE

program is unique in its integrated approach to improving student achievement. Not only focused on classroom practice, it locates students within families within schools within communities. In the position paper that called for the SAGE program, Molnar and Zmrazek argue that:

In poor communities, a lack of jobs, racism, and scarce resources undermine the network of adult support so necessary for the healthy development of children. In these communities, the school represents a focal point for building and maintaining a network of positive adult relationships around every child. School buildings can also serve as learning centers and recreational facilities for families as well as children. They can serve as a central location for community services designed to support families and help them deal with the stresses that often lead to violence and abuse (1994).

This logic adds building social networks to SAGE's power and goals. More than merely focusing on education knowledge, the reform was intended to provide social support to vulnerable families through the institution of the school, making it more likely that students in poverty have the resources assumed in middle class communities. It is clear from this logic that it would be important to locate this study in the literature on connections between home and school.

Studying Home-School Relations

There is little debate about the importance of families in schooling. Within popular opinion (Rouse & Gallup, 2005), empirical literature (Comer, 1980; Epstein, 1995), and policy (National Education Goals Panel, 1999) families are seen as key to student success, providing the foundation for school performance and important resources for school people. Despite this expectation, parents and teachers have had a troubled relationship. Illustrating

the tensions in home and school interactions, they have been described poignantly as natural enemies (Waller, 1932) and as operating in worlds apart (Lightfoot, 1978). Although both focused on student success, parents and teachers have different tools for supporting educational activities and quite different meanings about appropriate roles and goals (Katz, 1984). These differences are compounded when the participants represent different cultural groups with dissimilar life experiences and expectations about education (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lareau, 1989; Trumbull, Rothstein-Pisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). Additionally, these relationships have gender dynamics (Brantlinger, 2003; David, 1980; David, Edwards, Hughes, & Ribbens, 1993; Lareau, 1989) which determine how particular actors are expected to interact within the school context.

Approaches to Studying Families e³ Schooling. Researchers have invested much effort documenting the viewpoints and experiences of teachers and families. We very briefly describe three approaches to scholarship. The first, a descriptive approach, provides a typology of parent school partnership activities with the following elements: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and connecting to community (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). This was implemented in the Fast Response Survey (United States Department of Education, 1996) which found that almost all schools employ traditional initiatives like providing parent education, communicating about curriculum and student performance, soliciting volunteers, and suggesting home learning activities. In contrast, schools were less likely to involve families in school decision-making or to connect community resources to family needs.

A second type of research suggests positive, linear relationships between the family or school activities and student outcomes. Researchers generally find that schools that make efforts to form partnerships with families have students who have higher test scores (Eccles &

Harold, 1996; Sheldon, 2003), that family trust in teachers is related to higher student achievement (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001), and that family characteristics like parent education, income, and housing stability are related to more involvement and higher achievement.

These first two types of scholarship tend to conceptualize the links between home and school in terms of parent involvement – as the degree to which parents are engaged in their child’s education. From this perspective, the norms of involvement are typically set by the needs and expectations of the school. As a result, those parents that do not practice involvement in mainstream ways, reflecting typically the culture of white middle class teachers are viewed as under-involved and their children’s achievement is seen as at risk.

The final genre of research theorizes the mechanisms that produce different dispositions toward family involvement in schooling. This work focuses on power and/or practice suggesting that resources to support education are inequitably distributed. As a result, families and students have opportunities that are not always related to their own efforts. Cultural readings locate individuals in groups that are historically and politically configured (Brantlinger, 2003; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Graue, Kroeger, & Prager, 2001; Lareau, 1989). This work illustrates how relationship building between home and school has a cultural dimension that differentiates preferred interaction in patterned ways. Rather than being deviant from the white middle class norm, the school relationships of African-American, Latino/a, or Asian families represent their shared (but not singular) histories, personal experiences, the press of economic needs, and language resources. In contrast, work from a psychological perspective posits that parents develop models of their role vis-à-vis schooling that are shaped by perceptions of efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). For example, social networks provide resources that

help parents feel more competent in parenting and as a result, their children have fewer behavior problems and have higher achievement (Marshall, Noonan, McCarney, Marx, & Keefe, 2001). It is this more locally specific approach to home and school interactions, one conceptualized as a matter of relationships rather than involvement that we use in this paper. We prefer this perspective for its potential to view families as resourceful rather than at risk, as a way to view difference as diversity rather than deficit.

A Bakhtinian perspective on home-school relations. We approach our analysis of the family focus groups from a particular theoretical framework that has a specific perspective on power. This perspective assumes that “home school relationships are, in fact, a set of refracted relationships located in particular frames of history and biography—parents in relation to children, teachers in relation to students, parents in relation to teachers, home in relation to school” (Graue et al., 2001, p. 473). We recognized that understanding how families related to the schools in the context of a class size reduction program required us to think seriously about relationships because class size reduction theory suggests that teachers will develop different and more effective relationships with both students and families when there are smaller classes. To explore relationships, we turned to the work of M.M. Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, life is always conditional, experienced in relation to others. From a Bakhtinian perspective on home-school relations there is not one set of prescribed activities for families and schools but a series of constantly negotiated interactions that are located in particular histories and responsive to particular needs.

Life presents us with givens: formless disasters, undeserved illness, mindless revolution, unexpected good luck. In lived experience, as a rule, we do not come upon already existent unities or wholes. What makes me whole—Bakhtin might say, the only thing that makes me whole—is a *response* (Emerson, 1997).

Through Bakhtin's theories we see that home-school relations are local, contingent interactions between specific families and educators.

We rely on two complementary constructs in Bakhtin's work in this paper. The first, *answerability*, describes a concept of ethical responsibility. For Bakhtin, each individual is answerable to the other – we have a responsibility to care for the other, as that is what defines the self. According to Clark & Holquist (1984) “Responsibility is conceived as the action of responding to the world's need, and is accomplished through the activity of the self's responding to its own need for an other.” (p. 77). Answerability is related to home-school relations in its conceptualization of the responsibilities individuals and groups pose for themselves and others in the care and development of students. What roles and responsibilities do families set for themselves and others vis-à-vis schooling? How are these related to those set by school people?

Answerability's complement is the notion of *addressivity*—the idea that any act or utterance has a specific audience and intended outcome. Within an examination of home-school relations, addressivity is a matter of how participants conceptualize the audience for their actions. For example, when school people ask for volunteers for a school activity, are they looking for a particular type of family? Do families see themselves as part of that group?

Pairing answerability and addressivity allows us to examine home-school relations in a dialogic way, exploring how families map the terrain of action to support their students. None of the families we talked with came upon already existing unities—instead of entering existing relationships they became parents of school-aged students through their response to specific calls from their child's teachers and from the school in general. And we will show that these responses were not narrowly conceived but instead, they included perceived responsibilities beyond individual families and children. Their answerability was broadly social and their

addressivity potentially political. In the context of the SAGE program, which paired family strengthening elements with class size reduction, we had a unique opportunity to listen to participants' perspectives on a diffuse reform focused on increasing student achievement.

Method

During the 2004-5 school year we did case studies of nine schools participating in the SAGE program to get a sense of program implementation at the local level. In urban, semi-urban, and rural school communities that represented varied levels of student achievement, we chose three classrooms per school that best represented the SAGE practices in grades K-3. In each classroom we did eight half-day observations, interviews with principals, teachers and a sample of students, and collected relevant documents. These data provide an interpretive context for the interviews on which this paper is based.

Data Generation

During the 2005-6 year we returned for follow up interviews with participants and added family focus group interviews to gain access to family experiences with SAGE. At each school we conducted family focus groups with mothers, fathers, or grandparents nominated by school personnel to represent the school community. School staff was not present at these interviews and parents were invited to talk candidly about their interactions with school personnel. Family members were paid \$10 for their participation. Interview groups ranged from two to seven members and they lasted 40 to 120 minutes. The interview questions asked participants to describe their interactions with schools, their preferences for involvement, and their knowledge of home school activities, particularly as they related to SAGE. Initially we worried that our strategy of asking school people to nominate families for participants might bias the types of perspectives presented—that participants would be those who were highly involved or positive about school practices. We did not find that to be the case in our

interviews. Participants ranged from highly involved Parent Teacher Organization moms to unemployed fathers who did not understand why the school never took them up on requests to volunteer. We heard sharp critiques of principals and teachers as well as testimonials of educator excellence. Among our 48 participants, we had 39 mothers, 7 fathers, 2 grandmothers, 29 Caucasians, 13 African Americans, 2 Latinas, 3 individuals of Asian ancestry, 2 parents who identified themselves as having a child with special needs, and individuals across the economic spectrum.

Data Analysis

The focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The transcriptions were read in relation to our knowledge of the school setting from our previous data collection and across schools for location-specific patterns. Supported by the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, we analyzed the interviews using a variety of theoretical tools. As a first step we utilized Joyce Epstein's framework (1995) of family involvement and parent education to describe the types of involvement experienced by participants. We then examined the interviews using Bakhtin's (1993) ideas of answerability (a kind of responsibility) and addressivity (a relational way of being) to explore how families experienced relationships with schoolpeople. Answerability and addressivity are both related to issues of power and voice and were key to our understanding of how family members enacted particular identities in school contexts (Graue, Kroeger, & Prager, 2001). We listened carefully for descriptions of needs, responses in relation to needs and perceptions of roles, all elements of answerability and addressivity. This dialogic approach could be seen as having both inductive and deductive elements (Graue & Walsh, 1998) and allowed us to see how class size reduction both shapes and is shaped by the participating families.

As we constructed this paper we made a number of decisions about which voices to include and which stories to tell. One strategy would have been to compare the official information submitted by schools about their efforts related to the *lighted schoolhouse* component of the SAGE program with family evaluations of the adequacy of those activities. This was rejected because school approaches to the lighted schoolhouse were so different that trying to tell a story about family reactions would have been more cacophony than sense making. Another approach would have been to compare family stories of their involvement with teachers' perspectives on family engagement. We were leery about setting up a debate between home and school, knowing that that there was no way to present a balanced account. We chose a third approach, which was to weave together family ideas in a narrative that crossed schools and communities. The diversity of perspectives paired with strong thematic elements across sites included the most voices and allowed the family stories to stand on their own. That seemed the most respectful approach to both the family members that participated in the interviews and the educators working in the schools.

Findings

Home-School Relations and Answerability

I think there's a lot more [parents involved] than we know about. I think there wouldn't be the successes because I know that there are a lot of people working to bring these events together. They don't just pop out of the thin blue air, or the clear blue sky. But I think that I see a lot of these same people but I think there's a lot of people that are involved we just don't see. (Tamara, Allerton-Farwell Elementary)

It's commonly thought that families living in poverty are not as involved in their child's schooling as those with more economic resources. This view was echoed by educators during our fieldwork, most noting that the challenges families faced made it difficult to be fully

present in their children's educational lives. Our participants, representing a range of economic levels, were highly committed to their child's learning but struggled to stay connected with the school. In addition, many of them recognized the toll that poverty took on other families. They talked about living far away from school, working two jobs, being a single parent, having competing demands on their time. There was recognition that you don't always see the people providing support; it is almost as if they are working the second shift. Jackie, from Calloway, told us she would give support to the school but she needed to be asked for specific things. This shyness was complicated by her husband's erratic schedule as a military recruiter and the fact that they currently had one working automobile, a critical problem for a southerner experiencing her first January in Wisconsin. Jane noted that after concerted efforts to involve diverse families at Earhart through outreach and provision of translators, the numbers of families involved in the PTA was shrinking. "Their lives are so busy just trying to scrape out a living at this point that it's hard for them to fit anything else in. Or buy snacks. I mean people are *really* struggling."

With increasing mobility, families often make connections through their children. But these connections are not always easy and families searched for tools to help them support their child's social relationships and to make connections for themselves. The school is a natural matchmaker in this process, providing openings for interaction not available otherwise. At a basic level, family members talked about the challenge of setting up play dates for their children when they did not know other members of the community. Leslie (Allerton-Farwell) told us that when they moved to the rural community, she was at a loss for how to make social connections for her first grader. It seemed strange to write a note; she had no idea how to contact the families of potential playmates. While Leslie noted discomfort, Betty

(Earhart) struggled with wanting to connect her son with other children but not knowing how to work around language barriers:

He has this friend who he wants to see, but I can't talk to the parents. His uncle picks him up, the uncle doesn't speak English, and I'm having a hard time relaying the message to the parents. I got a hold of the dad, the dad won't get a hold of me. It's like well, I guess we'll just be friends with the kids on our street, and it seems like different groups of people have their own way of doing things. But I think that that tends to divide them up a little bit more like family lines and we feel like we want our boys to get out and to open up their eyes. (Betty, Earhart)

Some participants suggested a school phone book to ease family-to-family communication. Because teachers were not allowed to give out personal information without permission, a directory, even one that was voluntary, would open communication opportunities that were not currently available. Several parents talked about the PTA or school putting together a voluntary directory that listed child and parent names along with phone numbers. For some this was a tool for facilitating play dates, for others it was a framework for networking so that parents could share information and therefore support each other. When asked what he would like from the school a father from McMahan told us::

Just more open communication. Exchanging phone numbers, just giving each other a call if you need something or if I need you, I can just call you or ask you questions about what is going on. . . something printed out--if I agree to put on my name on this packet where if you need to call me for something on a volunteer basis. It's something that could be handed out to the kids. (Shrek, McMahan)

Particularly in the rural schools, families looked for after-school resources for their children. Because children were already there for the day, the school seemed a perfect site for

this type of activity. The isolation of families in rural environments was the focus of Ryan's suggestion for after-school activities:

Creating an environment where the kids can have something to do after school. When it was a farming community, you'd go home and you'd do chores. Where now they come home, there's not much to do so they do their homework and then it's fight to keep them away from the TV. In the wintertime it's too cold to go out. If there was a community center where they could get to that would be perfect. . . . Out here in the rural environment, we don't have a mall across the street, or you don't have kids next door to play with. I mean the kids next door are a mile away. (Ryan, West Canton)

Children form important social relationships at school. Families wanted to support those relationships because they recognized their importance. Epitomizing the story of the long handled spoons, families recognized that they were living in a context with particular constraints that required them to work together to help their children. They needed the schools to broker information and opportunities so that they could help themselves. This kind of social support is a natural enactment of SAGE's lighted schoolhouse element, something that works to alleviate the isolation attributed to poverty.

Building relationships

I'm glad I have the opportunity to get to know the teachers and the other students. I like the idea that the community--just what's going on in families and outside of school--is a part of school and that it's not separate. I see that happening when you get to know other parents and students and then the community develops. And then the students feel appreciated when they can tell their story or talk about who they are or tell about their trip to grandma's house or their wrestling meet, it's just fun to hear what kids are up to. (Laurie, West Canton)

While many might build home-school relations on expertise and resources (both of which are undeniably important) our participants reminded us that for a relationship to work, members must feel comfortable and welcome. Probably the most resounding theme in our discussions was a feeling of friendship or family in these schools. Participants yearned to have the school address a basic human needs for respect and recognition. They noted that simple kindnesses make a difference – smiles and being called by name, recognition by school people beyond the year a child is placed in a particular class. They saw the school as a family, where we all cared for each other.

It feels like an extension of home. Everybody takes time to know your kids and somehow you feel like “Wow we must be really special!” But all of the teachers know you've got this child and they are supportive, they communicate, you know if there's something positive happening you hear about it, and if there's something that needs work you hear about that too. (Betina, Montford)

Feeling welcome often comes from the opportunity to be physically present in the school – feeling part of a community of people invested in children’s learning. An open door that invited people in made it more likely that families felt recognized and therefore, respected for what they bring to schooling.

I see quite a few parents that come in with their kids now more than used to. Where they actually get them into the classroom and they socialize more with the teachers. I don't think people really thought they could. Even though it says it's an open door policy. I don't think people really thought that that's what it really meant-- that they could come in, drop their kids off in the morning, and say hi to the teacher so the teacher recognizes the child with the parent's face, which is really good to have.

(LeAnn, Bethany)

At one school a change in policy highlighted the importance of this physical connection. At Earhart a neighborhood school with few children bussed, families had recently been asked not to accompany their children into the building at the beginning or end of the day. Citing safety concerns and protecting the professional preparation time of the teachers, the drop off at the door policy interrupted the flow of home-school relationship for many parents:

The parents, especially of the young kids, used to come in to pick the kids up outside the classroom, now we're asked to stay outside. I think that was a teacher thing this year, it's made it feel a little less accessible. It felt like a community school when we could come in. In previous years it felt more welcoming. But that to me felt more like keeping the parents and the community at a distance. (Jane, Earhart)

The ongoing, face-to-face interaction leveraged the power of the neighborhood school, strengthening affiliation daily. Jane noted that a teacher might see things differently, but it really felt as if they were growing apart because the school no longer felt as if it belonged to the community.

Social connections.

I would like to be able to do something with my daughter and my son. And, you know have *fun*. Like maybe to be able to be around other parents because right now I'm not working so the only people I get to see usually is my husband and my kids. That's pretty much it. I like to be able to get out. (Jackie, Calloway)

Many of the participants valued the potential contribution the school could make by hosting events that connected home and school. Most of the schools already had a menu of activities – typically there was at least one major social event that involved inviting families on campus for Open House and sometimes an additional activity like a dance or potluck. More academically-oriented events included parent-teacher conferences and math or literacy nights

that distributed information about content to families. These activities varied in their utility for families and will be discussed later in the paper. What we heard most consistently in our conversations was that families were seeking *social* activities; things they could do with their kids or with other adults.

Families described an array of social activities they sought from the school designed for different purposes and participants and that met various needs. All shared the goal of addressing the multidimensional social component of family life. At the most basic, families looked for activities that allowed parents/guardians to interact with their children in informal settings – most typically located at the school and focused on FUN rather than learning. They imagined the school as a place to make connections among members of the school family. The first type of activity was designed for parents and children – sports, games, movies, meals – activities that promoted interaction among family members in a place outside their home. At Gallows, participants liked the idea of a bowling team for parents and kids or something that was not limited by the end of the school day. Rose noted, “that's what I would love. I would love that because I don't have a car. So I can't go out there and then afford it too. So if it's school involvement, it's free. Or you know like donate some money okay everyone gets their uniform, awesome. But have some kind of sport. School sport, baseball, basketball.” At Bethany families recalled the good old days when the school held family fun nights with many participants, including teachers.

Sam: There was like craft night ...

Sally: And they had like math night one time and there were games

Sam: And there's a lot of teachers involved that came to that.

Sherice: And that's the other thing too. The teachers came to more of the stuff.

Sam: Yeah, remember? They used to.

Sherice: Uh huh, the teachers came. And when we have teacher participation that does make a difference. It really does. Because there's interaction and you get to meet the teacher so when your child advances you already have a face-to-face. . .

Leann: That would really help getting us to meet other parents too. And getting to talk about, "Oh our kids are in your class, too? I didn't know that." You know, that type of thing.

Pauline: I agree with the family night that brings basically everybody together. Kids with other students, you know, that might not be in their class but they get to meet them there too. Parents meeting parents and teachers. I think it's a benefit for everybody. (Bethany).

Because of the social focus, families prefer activities that include teachers. Teacher presence showed that home-school activities, and therefore families, were valuable. But more importantly, it is part of building a social relationship with the school. Much like having daily face-to-face contact with staff, it gives families a more concrete connection with all the people who work with their children.

Some families wanted social activities focused on the adults. In what initially seemed a curious twist, participants described school-sponsored activities *without* students. Families wanted an opportunity to get together without the kids, a place to network or even to go out together. Natalie thought a parent potluck would be a good contribution to the school community "I think what they do need more is obviously trying to invite more parents on just a regular night, no learning, no kids only, no--parents only, just it all be parents and like a potluck kind of a thing." Beyond the instrumental perspectives on parent involvement that made parents useful in their support of the school, these parents saw value in turning the tables, with the school providing social resources for parents, without their children or a

learning task to direct interaction. This was important for parents who felt isolated, perhaps because they were not working outside the home (as noted by Jackie at the beginning of this section). Several schools provided this type of activity, allowing adult family members to go shopping or out to dinner while their children watched movies or did other activities in the school. At Calloway, they had *Parents Night Out*, an activity that served 115 children on a Friday night:

It's fun. We do the arts and crafts and feed them dinner, they get hot dogs, Momma Qs donates the pizzas for us, they have punch when they go home. All we ask for their babysitting fee is a snack enough for 15 kids. And then we put little bags together, quart sized bags, put them together and they go home with a treat at the end of the night. (Susie, Calloway)

Taken together, families described a powerful desire to connect with school people through respectful recognition on site, ongoing interaction at school and in special after-school activities that included parents and children and those designed for parents only. While some might see this as the school providing a simple social activities for families, we argue that it is more. It strengthens the social networks available to families, both within the school, and within communities.

Responding to Needs

In a strong example of answerability and addressivity, families often spoke of responding to the needs of others. Families described recognizing a call to action to meet the needs of the school, individuals, or the community as a whole. They also provided us with a complex picture of how these roles and tasks were defined. Sometimes there was a tightly coupled connection between the call and the response. At other times, miscommunication between the parties prevented cooperation or collaboration.

Families' answerability to the needs of the school. Families supported school calls for help by reading in classrooms, participating in field trips, supporting fundraising, and helping teachers with projects. Most of the participants involved in these ways spoke positively about these activities and saw them as providing needed support to the schools. Nou and Betina of Montford proudly spoke of selling popcorn to raise funds. Laurie of West Canton described weekly participation in her son's first grade classroom. Rose and Debbie laughed about their field trips with their children's kindergarten classrooms at Gallows. These stories fit with the traditional vision of "parental involvement," seen as enjoyable and useful by families.

However, Rose from Gallows pointed out this opportunity was not available to all: "...you just have some (families) that are working moms, working dads, so they just can't get here." Rose noted that she was only able to participate as a volunteer because she is currently unemployed. Participants that did "get here" noted the cost of that involvement in terms of lost sleep after working a twelve hour shift driving a truck (Sam from Bethany) or working all night in a factory (Shrek from McMahan) or even taking vacation days in order to work at the school (Susie from Calloway). We also heard that the schools often seemed to be seeking help from a particular type of parent. Shrek told us that the principal of his children's school asked him mentor African-American boys at McMahan (the principal is white, Shrek is African-American). Martin, another African-American father in the same school, with lots of experience working with children, volunteered to help out on playground. He was told he wasn't needed. What does it mean that these two men were treated so differently?

Parents recognized that to be partners with the schools, they needed good information. Families were provided with newsletters and calendars that described classroom activities. Schools sought to extend teaching into the home through presentations or tutoring about curriculum or content knowledge. According to families, these events seemed to

underestimate the knowledge that families already had. Susie and Natalie from Calloway described a math night that was poorly presented and not responsive to the academic concerns of the audience. Sherice from Bethany resented a workshop that framed families as students of the school rather than teachers of their own children. And Danielle from McMahon angrily told us about a “home visit” by the home-school coordinator to show her how to be a better parent.

Jane from Earhart suggested that schools stop thinking about what families need to learn but rather ask: “...What can you contribute? What would you like to see? How can we connect?” These are important questions, essential in beginning relationships with families. However these questions were not always asked by schools.

Families’ responses to needs of their communities. As we listened to families, it became apparent that they saw the school as part of the broader community. Families were aware of the needs of others within the school. There was a strong sense that by pooling resources they could create change for individuals and for the community as a whole. When families saw individual needs like lack of clothing, food and transportation they offered concrete solutions. If a family stood in the cold at the bus stop after a school event, they were given a ride. If someone needed a coat, one was found. And the rationale for these actions to address needs were often deeply social and political:

Unfortunately the economic turns into the social, which then causes the emotional, that turns into the educational and intelligence. Because somebody knows that you’re disadvantaged economically, and you have holes in your jeans, and you don’t have winter boots--if that is known and the kids say “Well your dad doesn’t work and blah, blah, blah” that kid gets down on himself and figures “If I’m not good enough to have

decent clothes, I'm not good enough to get an A on that test anymore." (Trina, Allerton-Farwell)

Other families saw needs and potential responses. They talked about creating community centers where children did not have access to many structured recreational opportunities. Nell from Allerton-Farewell knew that "the kids are in the streets because they don't have anything else to do" and Anna added "They're bored...it was the same since I was here." This prompted brainstorming about to fund existing sites for recreation needs in this rural community. Showing that this was not just a rural concern, Janice from Wellstone, which is located near the downtown of a large city, suggested that the school host monthly "safety" nights where children would learn about safety and not becoming involved with the "wrong crowd." The longing for a community gathering space is ironic as the SAGE legislation suggests that schools open their building for this very purpose. From the families' perspectives, this has yet to be fully realized.

Many families talked about diversity within their schools. Emerald from Wellstone empathized with families that did not speak the dominant language:

And so that's a big hindrance when the majority of the people here speak English and you have absolutely no idea what they're talking about. You know, so you know there are a lot of cultural things that would hinder a person from coming here or making it hard for them to approach.

Betty from Earhart talked about the pain of having her children asked to eat food prohibited by her religion:

This is such a multicultural school and everything but I think when you get too focused on certain cultures you forget about others. My kids are Muslim and had a really hard time at the beginning of the school year with being given pork in their

school lunches...and a couple of times they were given just bread and a few times they were told that if they were not allergic they had to just eat it.

Emerald and Betty identified the challenges families face who are not part of the dominant culture of the school. Other families were engaged in ensuring that all cultures were represented in school activities. At Earhart, Jane used a culture grant to bring community members into the school to give presentations including songs, rhymes and stories from families. At Calloway, Natalie described a festival where families in their diverse school could share their cultures through food and costumes. The focus was not so much on celebrating diversity but to help students and families understand the different cultural practices of their school community. Natalie's suggestion comes from her personal wish to share her Puerto Rican heritage and a concern with missed opportunities when questions about difference are not addressed. Natalie incorporated both her own experiences with her sense of responsibility to understand the experience of others.

Addressivity and the "Generic Parent." These families were involved with their children in ways that intersected with the lives of others. They understood the importance of being responsive to their neighbors' needs. They were attuned to the calls that others send. Pauline knew a hard working teacher at Bethany would appreciate that special dish Pauline would make just for her. Emerald at Gallows made sure Janice knew how her granddaughter was doing while Janice was at work. Ryan would continue to research ways to ensure that the air in the school building at West Canton was healthful. The families told us over and over that they saw themselves as having resources (a watchful eye, extra school supplies, or perhaps a spare morning) that would be useful to others and they wanted to take action but were sometimes unsure where to begin.

Families wanted the schools to see them as unique individuals rather than the “generic parent” so often imagined by schools and teachers. The model of the generic parent enacted assumptions about appropriate roles for parent engagement in schooling (most often white, middle class, and female) and stereotypes of those who did not fit the mold. It located expertise in the school, not in the home. This “generic parent” model fossilized opportunities for “involvement” in the schools during the school day and after hours. The model held even in the context of a class size reduction program that purportedly provided more frequent opportunities for teacher-family interaction and closer relationships.

Families had different vision. Families recognized the diverse needs and resources of their communities in part because they understood their own strengths and challenges. They understood at a very personal level the structural reasons that many families couldn't physically be at the school. They recognized the important work that all families did “behind the scenes.” And when families saw that the day-to-day work of surviving made parenting difficult for others, they were willing to step in with support. The power in this shared sense of responsibility reminded us of the table in heaven where one can give and receive sustenance simultaneously if all pay close attention to where the spoon needs to go.

Discussion

Janice: This is just a big family around here.

Valerie: You got people in your family that ain't quite right.

Janice: And you just feed them with a long handled spoon and you pray for them and move on.

Mr. Boyd: My family been around me, they feed me with a long handled spoon.

(Wellstone)

The SAGE program provides a unique opportunity to support student achievement through an integrated reform that explicitly works to intensify interactions between teachers and students and between home and school. By linking class size reduction with rigorous curriculum, professional development, and a lighted schoolhouse initiative, designers enacted a model that recognizes the contingent nature of student achievement. High quality teaching is a necessary component but so are frequent opportunities for student-teacher interaction, assistance for teacher learning and development, and a variety of supports for and by the community in which families live.

In this paper, we focus on the types of interactions families would like to have with schools. Across urban, semi-urban, and rural communities, 48 diverse participants shared stories of their experience with SAGE schools and their dreams for activities that would link home and school. Their passionate accounts indicated that the assumptions on which SAGE is based are reflected in many families' experiences—families looked to the school to help facilitate networks that supported student learning.

Families were seeking activities that addressed multiple needs and resources. They recognized that families are not alike; instead, they belonged to varied social groups. This variety indicates that activities to connect home and school should be equally diverse and that success might be related to the degree to which an activity addresses a need experienced in a local setting. As a first and ongoing step in any program working to connect home and school, needs and resource assessments of all relevant participants are vital. Rather than assuming what people want or can contribute, asking them in authentic ways that open up possibilities that were not already there could provide important information for action. In the same ways that evidence-based decision making links action to specific contexts, constructing home-school activities on the hopes and needs of particular individuals and groups at specific times

make it more likely they will connect resources and needs. And just as a teacher would never say that s/he did assessment at the beginning of the year so s/he has all the information needed to teach this year's group, needs assessments must be ongoing investments in home-school relationships. This approach takes up a specific addressivity linking activities to particular individuals and groups knowledge, resources, and experience. This kind of specificity should be possible in a class size reduction context with fewer families to contact and accommodate.

One of the greatest needs was connection *among* families. In our conversations, we were struck by how these interviews seemed to provide a much-needed opportunity for families to interact. There was an energy created through these short connections that seemed to come from being asked to contribute their ideas but more importantly, by being together. Families talked about needing support to build social relationships for their children or for themselves. They sought tools like a school telephone directory that would allow them to contact other families so that play-dates could be easily scheduled or so parents could share resources or expertise. They looked for opportunities to come together with other families; social events designed for positive interaction among members of the community. And because of the social focus of these events, families strongly valued having teachers present. They wanted a chance to build a personal social relationship with the person who was so important in their child's life, in a more low stakes environment than the typical parent-teacher conference or open house.

Given the strong press for academic achievement in today's schools, this focus on the social might seem like a frill. Who has time for arranging play dates and facilitating conversations among parents? But given the traditionally troubled nature between home and school, finding common ground, any common ground, is an invaluable investment for all those involved. Families are more likely to feel like partners with school people in these social

situations, which always seem to throw teachers a bit off kilter with all the noise, exuberant energy, and silliness.

Families also wanted to contribute to their community. They saw human needs and felt responsible to look beyond their own family to respond. And just as the needs were not the same, neither were the potential responses. Each family member saw something different, coming out of a particular experience and social location. They wanted to be present for their child at the school, to communicate with teachers at the beginning or the end of the day, to volunteer to help at the school, to organize events, or locate resources like school supplies or clothes for those who do not have enough. Schools varied in their ability to facilitate this version of answerability, and we heard stories of joyful contribution and sadly missed opportunities. To help families make these kinds of contributions, schools can help families broker expertise and resources at levels as varied as the classroom, school, and neighborhood. Based on recognition of family diversity, options for involvement need to be inclusive of the families as much as they respond to school need. This again is based on familiarity with familial resources, something theoretically accessible in a class size reduction context. It is sometimes as important for people to give as it is for someone to receive and finding ways to recognize the potential gifts families can provide might be one way to help loosen the grip of the generic parent on the minds of school people.

Finally, families wanted recognition of and respect for all they brought to school. They longed to be seen as assets to their child's education, individuals with some kinds of expertise that could be tapped by the school. They worked hard to support their children along with everything else they did. It did not always work out perfectly; sometimes their children were tardy and sometimes they forgot to send in the permission slip for a fieldtrip. But in the big scheme of things, there were more successes than failures. It was important to them when

they felt recognized as individuals who were part of a relationship, as valued members of a community. The discussions among family members presented here resonate with the cultural perspectives on home-school relations, providing an asset-based perspective on what families bring to schooling. The descriptions stand on their own, without comparison to the practices/ideas of other social groups. These comparisons often present families in poverty as lacking the resources of mainstream middle class families, who anchor much of the practice in schools. Although we recognize the challenges many of these families and members of their community experienced, we wonder how school practices might change if we changed our ideas about what families wanted or what they could contribute. Given the resource of class size reduction, educators have the opportunity to get to know families in ways that had escaped them before.

These themes illustrate the utility of three ideas in our analysis. The first is a type of addressivity illustrated by the idea of the generic parent, an imaginary client of the school around whom most home-school activities are designed. This notion of the generic parent is highly normative, reflecting educator assumptions about what constitutes “good” parenting, what parents need to support schooling, and the resources available at home. It ignores the capital that all families bring to school as well as the needs of individual and groups of families in a local context. When home school relations are created around ideas of generic parent, there is a profound disconnect among the lived experiences of families, the expectations of schoolpeople, and their actual interactions. It is much like creating a parent-child relationship from a child development text—it speaks to issues of typicality but not specificity. It ignores the basic concept of needs in relationships, needs that are specific, local, and very real.

Second, the “generic parent” model is especially lacking in utility when applied to issues of gender. Home-school relationships are usually predicated on a “mothering discourse”

(Griffith & Smith, 2004) that assumes that the mothers are the primary contacts with the school. It is assumed that mothers are available both during the day (to attend conferences, performances, class parties, field trips) and at night as well (for homework support and reading activities). This conception of the “ideal family” with a working father and a stay-at-home mother is a myth which has permeated popular culture (Coontz, 2000) but in no way represents the majority of families especially in these SAGE schools with high levels of poverty. Economics often shape the way in which families interact with schools (Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, 1989) yet the “generic parent model” often expects that mothers be available and fails to consider what most mothers told us – they are working outside the home and many times at more than one job. The “generic parent” model and its denial of gender dynamics is particularly salient when school programs included a meal. Many of the mothers in the focus groups said that events that included a meal were essential because they freed up time from one task (making dinner) to accomplish another charge set as a member of the school community (be present at an after-school event). Women highlighted the disjuncture in these activities and their lived experience when they told us that they felt that the schools provided these meal as a means to lure families in rather than an acknowledgement of their lives as mothers and the important work they did for their children, their families and their communities.

Third, the reason that the generic parent is such an empty approach to connecting home and school is its illustration of the importance of *answerability* and *addressivity* in relationship building. Families clearly spoke of answerability to their communities—from responsibilities to support their own children, to volunteering at the school, to working for change in the community. Their disposition was responsive, with recognition that relationships are contingent on the needs of the participants. The use of the generic parent as

a template for school-based action meant that the answerability of school people was generic as well, lacking all the specificity and passion of real time relationships. This extends to the idea of addressivity, which describes the intended or understood audience for any action. When activities are designed without attention to the audience they are meant to serve, the audience is not likely to respond positively. Lack of participation then plays into deficit models of family resources, with families seen as uninvolved and uneducated. When family and literacy activities are designed without attention to family knowledge or need, they land with a thud with families feeling underestimated and educators assuming that parents are not responding well because they do not care. A recursive cycle is reinforced, one where families do not feel connected or respected and school people feel neglected. A simple assessment, taken seriously in the planning stages could avoid that. Approaching home school relations from a perspective informed by class size reduction theory of action locates activity in relation to need and resources, contingent on what individuals and groups bring to the relationship.

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

It's often said that schools are expected to do more and more – in addition to being educators, teachers are now expected to be nurses, social workers, and mediators. Is it reasonable to ask that schools take on the social connection function given all the other roles schools already fulfill? It might be as easily asked if it is reasonable for them to NOT take up this role. There are several reasons for this position. From a purely legal perspective, the SAGE legislation has as one of its components the *lighted schoolhouse* that calls for the school to broker educational and recreational opportunities between families and the community. From a theoretical perspective, the provision of such opportunities provides social resources to stressed communities, making more likely the development of resilient and successful families and students (Bronfenbrenner, 1978; Comer, 1984). From a political perspective, it

empowers families by helping them develop the tools to help themselves and it alerts schools to the importance of assessing family needs (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). From a Bakhtinian perspective, it highlights the degree to which school and families have ethical responsibilities for each other with a focus on responsive or dialogic relations.

The voices in the family focus groups belonged to mothers, fathers and grandmothers who loved their children. While we don't argue that they represent all families, we are comfortable in asserting that their ideas represent something important in the implementation of the SAGE program and beyond. The social element that is part of the basic structure of this reform is exactly what these families want. And more than that, they want to contribute to that social framework themselves. The class size reduction component of SAGE can facilitate the building of social networks, allowing educators to intensify their outreach with a smaller number of families. But it is not something that happens as a matter of course. With all the other pressures on teachers, reaching out to families often falls by the wayside. In this context, it seems that it may be time to reassert the importance of the lighted schoolhouse element of the SAGE program. It is central to accomplishing the goals of the program and the needs are there to fill. If all we have is long handled spoons, doesn't it just make sense?

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