

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Exploration of How the Foundations Intervention Influences Family-Professional Partnerships in Head Start: A Case Study

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This study explores family-professional partnerships in a Head Start and considers how an intervention designed to address needs of young children through joint efforts by families and Head Start teachers may influence those partnerships. The site in this study exemplifies Head Start's commitment to family partnership, making it a suitable setting for a case study. The researcher observed and interviewed three teachers, four family members, and one Head Start administrator. The first research question explored pre-existing attitudes and structures related to partnerships at this Head Start. Three themes emerged: (a) program understanding of family partnership; (b) national performance standards and program administrative structures emphasizing family support and participation; and, (c) local Head Start leadership. The second research question explored the intervention's influence on this setting's partnerships and identified four themes: (a) developing shared goals between family members and teachers; (b) sharing knowledge of home and school environments; (c) collaborating to achieve the child's goals; and (d) interactions with enhanced communication, high expectations, and commitment. These seven themes showed how the process, which relied on existing beliefs and administrative structures, had positive impact on family partnership when using the Foundations Intervention.

Keywords: partnership, Head Start, self-determination, early childhood, disabilities

This study investigates Head Start beliefs, attitudes, and administrative structures regarding family-professional partnerships. This study also examines how one intervention, which emphasizes partnerships in its implementation, may influence relationships between families and professionals. Family-professional partnerships are equal collaborative relationships that benefit families, professionals, and children equally. Families and professionals defer to each other's judgment and expertise (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011). At Head Start, *family engagement* is positive and goal-oriented relationships grounded in the foundations of program leadership, continuous improvement, and professional development. Characteristics of *family partnership*, a component of family engagement, are (a) building relationships with families, (b) supporting family well-being, (c) strong relationships between parents and their children, and (d) ongoing learning and development for parents and children (Administration for

Children and Families, 2011). Head Start promotes family partnership as a way for families and children to pursue and achieve their identified goals. This understanding of family-professional partnership is consistent with special education definitions (Summers et al., 2005; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011; Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007). For the purpose of this paper, we use family partnership to describe relationships between the families and teachers at Head Start.

Head Start recently unveiled *The Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework*, a research-based organizational guide for implementing performance standards (Administration for Children and Families, 2011) using comprehensive, integrated, and systematic practices across programs. Head Start leaders see this framework as the next step in enhancing understanding of and support for families who play critical roles in their children's long-term success (Administration for Children and Families, 2011). The framework helps programs promote family partnerships, in the contexts of family and community engagement, across Head Start settings.

Understanding of strategies that individual programs should use to promote partnership is lacking. Mendez (2010) found significant correlation between the quality of parent-teacher relationships at Head Start and parent participation in her Companion Curriculum. This partnership intervention included participation in parent literacy workshops (Mendez, 2010). However, other studies only address involvement of families during preschool years, without specific guidance for how this occurs (Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). Many studies of family involvement in early childhood programs are insufficient to understand depth of partnerships, since family partnership interventions usually distinguish between interpersonal (e.g., respectful, helpful) and structural factors (e.g., caseload, resource development) (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000; Mendez & Fogle, 2002).

Most interventions that have more in-depth understanding of family-professional partnership involve children aged birth to three who are in home-based early intervention programs rather than preschool. Characteristics of these partnership interventions are (a) mutual trust, (b) support for family culture, (c) discussion and exploration of family routines, (d) effective communication between families and professionals, and (e) competence and confidence promotion for families and professionals (Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 2010).

Closely aligned characteristics are evident in the partnership intervention model that Palmer et al. (2012) propose in their conceptual framework that explores foundations of self-determination for preschoolers in early childhood settings. The Foundations Intervention design supports families and early childhood professionals to develop skills in young children considered the precursors of later development of self-determination: self-regulation, engagement, and choice making. The Foundations Intervention consists of a simple problem solving process with four components: *Assess*, *Select*, *Try It*, and *Reflect*. First, the *Assess* process involves the parent, teacher, and facilitator in the use of a modified version of the Routines-Based Interview (McWilliam, Casey, & Sims, 2009). In each dyad, the teachers and parents reflected on the children's daily routines in the contexts of their families and classrooms. Second, the *Select* process requires the parent, teacher, and facilitator to work together to *select* a short-term goal (for example, eight to ten weeks); this distinguishes the Foundations Intervention from the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process, as goals developed for the IEP are annual goals. Once they agreed on a specific goal for home and school, the facilitator helped the parent-teacher dyad develop a rubric for measurement on the Goal Attainment Scale (GAS) (Kiresuk, Smith, & Cardillo, 1994). The GAS identified the child's individual goal and five potential outcomes,

ranging from least to most favorable. The mid-point of this scale was the child's expected outcome, which is what the teacher and parent decided was a satisfactory outcome for the child's progress. Third, the *Try It* step included both the family member and the practitioner in trying one or more strategies. A key feature of this step involved asking teachers and parents to use a flip camera or videophone to record the child trying the identified strategy, then sharing what happened at home and school. Fourth, the *Reflect* step required the family and practitioner to think together about how well their strategies worked, and to reach a consensus score on the GAS. The collaborative reflection could result in selection of a new goal or in revision of the strategies to continue working on a goal, depending on the judgment of the family and teacher. For more in-depth explanation of the conceptual framework of components and purposes of the Foundations Intervention, see Palmer et al. (2012). For the Foundations Intervention study, the purpose was to impact children's skills related to the development of self-determination (i.e., enhancing self-regulation, engagement, or choice making skills based on the participants' assessments). For results of the Foundations Intervention on development of children's skills, we refer the reader to Palmer et al. (2012) and Summers et al. (2012).

The strong emphasis on the family and professional collaboration in the Foundations Intervention, which involved close cooperation at each step, led the research team to wonder how participation in that intervention might affect the quality of the partnership. Because the site in this study exemplifies Head Start's commitment to family partnership, it made a suitable setting for in-depth exploration. Therefore, we asked two research questions using a single program case study. The first question sought in-depth understanding of what beliefs, attitudes, and administrative structures related to family-professional partnerships were endemic to this Head Start site before implementation of the intervention. The second question examined how participation in the Foundations Intervention involving both parents and professionals may have influenced those partnerships.

METHOD

Research Design

The researchers used a qualitative interpretative design to improve understanding of Head Start policies and beliefs and the Foundations Intervention's influence on family-professional partnerships. The research design emphasizes learning how intervention participants construct meaning of experiences and interactions with their social worlds (Merriam, 2002). This provides deep understanding of Head Start beliefs, attitudes, and administrative structures about family partnerships. The research design also reveals how the Foundations Intervention may influence Head Start partnerships. Our approach was to examine one Head Start program as a case study and several individual teacher-family pairs as embedded cases within the site (Yin, 2009).

Background of the Researcher

Qualitative researchers bring their assumptions, experiences, and belief systems to their work and provide information about their backgrounds to illuminate their biases (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002). For this study, the lead researcher draws from personal and professional

experience to support family-professional partnership practices and believes services should be supportive and integrative, based on needs of children and their families. The lead researcher is female, white, and has a middle-class background. Her family has extensive experience working with service programs such as Head Start because three of her children have received early intervention services. Two of these children are enrolled in special education services. The other researchers are also white females with an orientation toward understanding family-professional partnerships in settings serving young children. The lead researcher facilitated the Foundations Intervention at this site and, like the other researchers, was involved in the larger Foundations study.

Setting and Participants

Purposive sampling determined choice of participants within a particular research site (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007). This site met three purposive sampling criteria because it (a) provided Head Start services for children aged three to five who have or are at risk for having disabilities, (b) used a home and classroom-based service delivery model, and (c) provided services to a diverse group of children and families. Participants within the site met four primary criteria: they (a) were interested in participating in both studies (i.e., the larger Foundations study and this case study), (b) represented diversity of families and children at this Head Start, and (c) received services for their preschoolers from the Head Start or worked as teachers or administrators. All participants were Caucasian, Latino, African American, or from multiple ethnic groups; they varied in age from 20-56 years and included seven females and one male. Four family members, three teachers, and one administrator participated in the study. Table 1 includes detailed descriptions of participants.

TABLE 1
Description of Participants

Name	Role	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Age of Child in Study	Current Employment	Level of Education
Teresa	Teacher	28	Female	Caucasian	N/A	Head Start	Bachelor of Arts
Lydia	Teacher	44	Female	Caucasian	N/A	Head Start/ Student	Associate of Arts
Malita	Teacher	25	Female	Latina	N/A	Head Start	Child Development Associate
Monica	Parent	25	Female	Latina	3	Unemployed	High School
Albert	Parent	45	Male	Caucasian/ Native American	4	Maintenance Person	10th Grade
Yolanda	Parent	35	Female	African-American	3	Hair Stylist	Associate of Arts
Betty	Administrator	56	Female	Caucasian	N/A	Head Start	Master of Arts

Data Collection

The researcher collected data through observations and semi-structured interviews, which allowed for observation of what occurred at the site and for asking participants about what happened at various times. This process of exchange between researcher and participants is *participant observation*, which the next section describes in detail.

Participant observation. This method uses “active membership role(s)” in which researchers are “involved in the setting’s central activities, assuming responsibilities that advance the group, but without fully committing themselves to members’ values and goals” (Adler & Adler, 2000, p. 380). We used informal observations for the case study. Informal interactions between parents and teachers at pick up times, during team meetings, and during interactions among teachers, families, and administrators in hallways at the Head Start setting, were observed. The researcher spent approximately three hours in informal observations. Completion of six formal and informal observations in various settings and with numerous participants helped capture diverse perspectives for the study. Field notes written during formal observations and after each informal observation supported the data collection process.

Semi-structured interviews. This study’s interview protocol followed the Foundations Intervention model. The researcher conducted one semi-structured interview with each family and teacher. This interviewing method allows flexibility by generating new questions in response to what interviewees say (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002). A semi-structured interview guide that the primary researcher wrote provided direction. Two *grand tour* questions (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972) specific to the study focused on development of partnerships and the Foundations Intervention’s relevance to Head Start. Examples of questions for teachers on these topics included:

- How has your interaction with families changed as a result of using the Foundations model?
- Describe how your previous interaction was different from this interaction.
- If your interaction has not changed, why do you think that is?

The observations and interviews added to the researcher’s involvement with participants in implementing the intervention. The next section details the application of the Foundations intervention’s problem-solving process to those parent/teacher dyads that participated in this case study.

Procedure for Implementing the Foundations Intervention

Assessing the child’s strengths and needs. The first part of the Foundations Intervention stressed assessing the strengths and needs of both the child and the family. The facilitator asked the participating Head Start teacher and parent to think together about questions such as (a) How does your day start? (b) What works well during your day? and (c) How often do you see that behavior during snack time? In the case of Tori and Lydia, they decided that Kyle had strengths in following through on tasks, writing, drawing, and learning complex

concepts. However, Kyle needed additional support to follow directions, manage his behavior, and complete non-preferred tasks. For Monica and Teresa, this part of the problem solving process helped determine what tasks were most difficult for CeCe to finish at home and school.

Selecting short-term goals and accompanying strategies. The discussion about measuring goals generated strategies for the parent and teacher to try as they worked towards the goal. When Malita and Yolanda discussed goals they each wanted to work on at home and in the classroom, they found their priorities for A.J. differed. Malita wanted A.J. to have his own strategies for knowing when he needed a break or more attention from a teacher, other than climbing on bookcases or hitting other children. Yolanda wanted to be sure A.J. engaged appropriately with activities in the classroom, at home, and in the car. Specifically, Yolanda wanted A.J. to stay busy so she could drive home safely and cook supper. Keeping A.J. busy was not a concern at school; knowing when he needed a break was not a concern at home. Therefore, this step of the process determined goals that would work for both Yolanda and Malita while keeping A.J.'s needs in mind.

Trying strategies at home and preschool. Yolanda and Malita enjoyed sharing A.J.'s progress in this step by using the video or photo features on their smartphones. For Teresa and Monica, this process of videotaping and talking about the strategies was useful because it helped Monica understand how Teresa used the handwashing poster to get CeCe to wash her hands more successfully at school. Next, Monica used a toothbrushing poster at home, along with some of the same language Teresa used at school with CeCe, to work on the home goal.

Collaboratively reflecting on how the strategies worked. With the facilitator's help, the parent-teacher dyad reflected on how the process worked for them and the child. At minimum, the dyad reflected on "What worked best?" and "What could they have changed?" This reflection led to the next step: identification of more goals for the child, as in the case of Tori and Lydia who chose to work on transitions from home to school and from school to home for Kyle. Tori remarked that Kyle seemed to achieve goals much faster if she and Lydia worked on them simultaneously. This was the primary reason Tori and Lydia identified working on transitions as a next step. Conversely, Teresa and Monica's reflection led to Monica's increased ability to understand how to support CeCe at home, so Monica felt it was not necessary to work on another goal. Monica initially thought she did not need to change what she was saying or doing while she and CeCe were in the bathroom brushing CeCe's teeth. Once Monica changed what she said to CeCe, gave CeCe choices, and reflected those choices on the toothbrushing poster in the bathroom, CeCe was much more successful working towards her goal. When reflection led to goal identification, the Foundations Intervention was restarted to gather more information about children and families' routines. That information included details about childrens'/families' routines and strengths/challenges specific to the new goals. Outlining procedural components of the Foundations Intervention improved understanding for data analysis, which is the next section's topic.

Data Analysis

Coding process. Two members of the case study research team met regularly during the course of data collection to discuss ongoing interviews, interview summaries, observation summaries, field notes, and emerging categories. Data sources included interview transcripts, transcript summaries, observation summaries, and field notes. Analysis included three phases of coding: open, pattern, and selective (Saldana, 2009). During open coding, the lead researcher examined separate parts of the data on an ongoing basis, and then compared existing data for similarities and differences (Saldana, 2009). The goal of open coding was to remain open to any possibilities emerging from the data and to code them as such. Examples of initial codes included (a) teachers as partners, (b) understand complexity of families, (c) program is family's advocate, (d) families work here, (e) families are important, and (f) support at home and school.

Pattern coding followed open coding methods. The lead researcher reformatted and reorganized initial codes identified in open coding into themes and categories, similar to a constant comparison method (Saldana, 2009). This procedure was the basis for coding subsequent transcripts, field notes, and observation summaries. Specifically, the researchers divided transcripts according to identified themes or categories. Next, the researchers gathered all responses, coded them within each organizing theme or category, and summarized their main points. These codebooks underwent modification with the addition of new transcripts until no new themes or categories emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Patton (2002) suggested that "categories and their properties emerge or are integrated together" (p. 32) to define this analytical procedure. Inclusion of themes in the researcher-developed codebook underscored partnership practices between families and teachers.

Underscoring partnership practices through development of themes led the researchers to use the third coding phase, selective coding. We arranged the identified categories and themes into a partnership framework, which incorporates the three major themes and their subthemes into work for future consideration and study emphasizing improved family-professional partnership.

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness of the analysis refers to processes in the study contributing to quality and rigor of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2013). The team peer review process discussed above contributed to credibility of the process during data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings. Specific questions included (a) Are there links between the data and findings (credibility)? (b) Are identified themes offering new insights or expanding the existing literature base (originality)? and (c) Will programs and families be able to use the findings and interpretations in meaningful ways (usefulness)? A comprehensive member check that allowed participants to evaluate accuracy of the researcher's analysis was another credibility mechanism. The member check took place between weeks ten and 15 (fall 2011) of the larger Foundations Intervention study completed in spring 2013. The lead researcher asked participants whether the summary represented their perspectives accurately and whether important information was missing. One mother provided particularly extensive input for the member checking process. The results incorporated significant revisions based on information gathered through this procedure.

RESULTS

This study's specific purpose was to explore the administrative structures at Head Start and the impact of implementing the Foundations Intervention on family-professional partnerships at the program level. The researchers addressed two research questions to achieve this purpose. First, what Head Start beliefs, attitudes, and administrative structures relate to family-professional partnerships? Second, how did participation in the Foundations Intervention influence Head Start partnerships?

Research Question 1: What Beliefs, Attitudes, and Administrative Structures at Head Start Relate to Family-Professional Partnerships?

This research question identifies pre-existing beliefs, attitudes, and administrative structures at the Head Start program related to family-professional partnerships. Illuminating these factors to understand how implementation of the Foundations Intervention may have affected partnerships in the program is important. Head Start performance standards emphasize family-professional partnership, but each program site may interpret and implement standards differently. The researchers sought to examine this program's interpretation of standards along with formal and informal structures supporting family-professional partnerships. Analysis identified three themes related to family-professional partnerships: (a) program understanding of family-professional partnerships, (b) national performance standards and program administrative structures emphasizing family support and participation, and (c) local Head Start leadership.

Understanding of family-professional partnership. Conversations with families, teachers, and administration at this Head Start suggested the program showed understanding of family-professional partnerships. Betty, the program administrator, spoke about Head Start's long-term commitment to families as partners. This commitment confirmed that Head Start understood how to support families facing multiple challenges in their homes and in classrooms. "Head Start is very intentionally looking at the whole child and the whole family and serving both. That makes perfect sense to me. We can't separate them and if we do, we set ourselves up to fail." Lydia, one of the teachers, characterized Head Start beliefs, attitudes, and administrative structures. "We work hard at Head Start to make connections with the families because they are a part of our program. The more we learn about the families the better able we are to support their children." Reliance on team members who had been Head Start parents was another aspect of beliefs, attitudes, and administrative structures at Head Start. While teachers interviewed for this study had not participated as Head Start parents, three of their teaching co-workers were in former Head Start families. Study participants thought that working with these teachers on classroom teams helped them understand families of children in their classrooms, as Monica explained:

"Our colleagues are Head Start families, and they understand families in a way we cannot. So if I feel like I have a family who I am going on a "fishing expedition" with to obtain information, I ask my colleagues for other ways to say the same thing so we are communicating most effectively."

With respect to family members' perceptions of the beliefs, attitudes, and administrative structures, one parent identified Head Start as an advocate for her child and as a place where she felt her child was safe. Some families, especially those with more than one child in the program, perceived the administrative structures as changing in response to teachers' styles and settings. One mother said she had an array of partnerships with teachers, ranging from strong to "so-so" partnerships. She was not sure she could identify all teachers in one child's classroom by name. The study's lone father expressed similar feelings; teachers sometimes viewed him as the "picker upper" and not as the person responsible for his child's well-being.

National performance standards and administrative structures emphasizing family support and participation. Performance standards intervention was part of the program's administrative structures. With the support of extensive professional development activities, administrators expected teachers to know, understand, and implement Head Start performance standards. Betty stated, "We expect teachers to possess certain qualities to make them most successful, their understanding of the performance standards is important." Responding to the lead researcher's questions, teachers said they were familiar with Head Start performance standards and that they believed the standards guided their efforts to engage families.

In further discussion of the program's administrative structures, teachers gave examples of barriers that negatively affected their ability to interact with families. Teachers perceived that paperwork demands, staff turnover, and staff shortages influenced the quality of their interactions with families. Teachers also believed these barriers impeded their ability to implement the partnerships to the degree their beliefs required, such as time to talk to each parent at the beginning or end of each day and time to make phone calls or home visits to families. As Lydia said in her interview, "The paperwork and trying to get more than one person to meet at the same time--that is really challenging. We are all busy. We have jobs and we are going to school." Note: Head Start qualifications for teachers changed during the study, necessitating additional credit hours to maintain employment as teachers in Head Start.

By contrast, teachers identified several complex factors related to children and families they served, but did not identify these factors as barriers to partnership. One factor was diversity of needs across classrooms (i.e., two to three children in each classroom had individual family service plans or individualized education programs). Another factor was that almost half the children in classrooms were learning to speak English as a second language. Teachers said significant numbers of families in their classes had mental health and substance abuse challenges. Malita also discussed family financial challenges: "Not just this family, but many families have two or three jobs just to make ends meet." However, teachers saw extensive, diverse needs of children and families as commonplace. During interviews, teachers gave no indication that these needs undermine their interactions with families.

Local Head Start leadership. Most families and professionals reported they had strong family-professional relationships supported by administrators of this Head Start program. Betty's roles as a parent of a child with a disability and as a Head Start professional strengthened her ability to understand family-professional partnerships. According to Betty, these roles also helped fellow administrators and teachers to understand families:

“Our families have millions of challenges, and we have to put that in perspective. We cannot expect parents to prioritize [their child’s educational needs], when we’re doing something here [at Head Start] they’re not going to forget everything else that’s challenging them. We really have to meet them where they’re at and appreciate and understand all of the challenges that they have before them. This takes special skills.”

Betty went on to say she did not believe that all Head Start staff had the skills needed to collaborate most effectively with families. She noted there was large variation in the quality of teachers. However, Betty pointed out that Head Start leadership was committed to professional development for all staff supporting family-professional partnerships. Teachers interviewed in this study understood their roles in promoting and implementing partnership strategies. Teachers also identified Head Start leadership as supporting work with families. According to Teresa,

“If at any time we need to talk or meet with the family, if everyone has enough coverage, the program administrators go out of their way to make sure we have the time and space to meet. Head Start believes that partnerships with families make our program as good as it is so they honor the time we need to spend with families because they know it makes us better teachers.”

However, families were less certain about leadership roles. Tori, a member of the program’s Head Start policy council, explained that

“I am at the meetings, but I am not always sure what they (the administration) want me to do. I listen. I am not sure if they want my input or if they just want to tell us (the parents) what is happening at the program.”

Research Question 2: How Did Participation in the Foundations Intervention Influence Partnerships in this Head Start?

Four themes specific to activities involved in implementing the Foundations Intervention emerged across the data collected for the study. Aspects of the Foundations Intervention that participants believed were important for influencing partnership include: (a) developing shared goals between the family member and the teacher; (b) shared knowledge about home and school environments; (c) collaborating in working towards the child’s goals; and (d) interactions characterized by enhanced communication, high expectations, and commitment.

Developing shared goals. For this component of the Foundations Intervention, the parent and teacher picked a goal for the child based on his or her needs. As noted in the description of the intervention, the parent and teacher considered the challenges the child faced in one or more of the three Foundations areas (i.e., engagement, choice making, and self-regulation) during the course of the day at home and at school. The format was a preschool adaptation of the routines-based interview often used in early intervention services (McWilliams, 2006). Although they were not required to do so, families and teachers often chose similar goals for the child to work on at home and at school. Teachers were enthusiastic about developing

shared goals with families. Lydia explained. “If you have a goal, you always want to try and do the best for the child. I think you get a little closer to that child because you want him to succeed.” Teresa agreed:

“I think the model is working great. I have lots of organizations I work with and many times the agencies do not have the same goals as the parent. Our goals are similar. We are all working on the same page, and this is different than what usually happens.”

Tori added that “Having a goal for Kyle means we always have something to talk about with Lydia...that is important to both Albert and I...the goals are based upon Kyle’s needs and that is really important.”

Gaining shared knowledge of the child’s environments. Shared knowledge of the child’s environments meant teachers had better understanding of the child’s routines, interests, and activities at home, and of the challenges within the context of these routines. Families felt they had better understanding of their child’s day at Head Start and of their child’s school routines, interests, and activities. Families often found teachers faced the same struggles in the classroom as they did at home. Maria offered her perspective: “We have a more open relationship...I know what is happening at home and she (Teresa) knows better what is happening here at school and how hard we are working to make CeCe successful at home.” Malita, a teacher, expressed the same appreciation for understanding more about what is happening at home and at school: “Foundations is helping me get my mind going around what things I should be trying or should have tried and how they are already working at home so that makes our work in the classroom that much easier.”

Collaborating in work on the child’s goals. Once both partners shared an understanding of what happened at home and school, they were able to target the specific goal to better support the child in both environments. Both families and teachers felt this mutual dialogue was helpful and agreed that the video exchange increased clarity regarding best use of suggested strategies. Lydia stated that collaborative work on the goals helped her to “be more consistent in the strategies we implement at home and school... Kyle’s success is dependent upon how well he does at home and school.” Tori added that, “I had lots of strategies already. I think what has really helped me was to problem solve with someone who has strategies as well.”

Interactions characterized by enhanced communication, high expectations, and commitment. The researcher and the participants noticed this theme occurring as the parent and teacher completed the intervention process. Families observed the teachers having higher expectations for, commitment to, and better communication with their children. Albert reported, “I see all the teachers in the classroom giving more attention to Kyle. Tori sees it, too. It makes us feel good about Kyle being in Lydia’s classroom.” The teachers also noted their own high expectations for children. Malita affirmed, “I feel like this model is the backbone to what we were already doing and we were missing a piece so it is helping to complete the puzzle for A. J.”

Positive interactions between the child and the teacher led to positive assessments of the interactions between families and teachers. Maria affirmed this by saying, “Yes, we are a lot closer than we were when we first started. My interactions with Teresa are positive. CeCe loves

Teresa and loves coming to school. I appreciate all that she does for her. CeCe has blossomed!” Malita shared her enthusiasm for positive interactions and her commitment to them. “The parents are the child's family and whatever they experience, so do the kids. I think it is our job to make the parents feel great so the kids feel good about themselves, this process helped us do that.”

DISCUSSION

Our findings in this qualitative study generally suggest that family and professional participation in the Foundations Intervention may influence partnerships, especially in a program that has compatible beliefs about families and the importance of partnership. In addressing our first research question, we succeeded in understanding the beliefs, attitudes, and administrative structures evident at this Head Start. The emphasis in Head Start on family partnerships included three components: (a) an understanding of family-professional partnerships, (b) national performance standards and program administrative structures emphasizing family support and participation, and (c) local leadership efforts. These three characteristics laid the groundwork for implementation of the Foundations Intervention, resulting in interactive, collaborative partnerships where partners shared goals and knowledge. Program staff saw family challenges as part of their jobs and did not blame families for compromised partnerships. These attitudes among staff members indicate their respect and support for families. This perspective contrasts with findings in other research where teachers or other early childhood professionals often identified family characteristics as barriers to high-quality home-school relationships (Hadley, 2012; Marchini, 2011; Trainor, 2010).

Findings relevant to the second research question disclosed aspects of the Foundations Intervention that participants believed were important to enhancing partnership. These aspects include (a) developing shared goals between the parent and the teacher; (b) shared knowledge about home and school environments; (c) collaborating in working towards the child's goals; and (d) interactions characterized by enhanced communication, high expectations, and commitment. The Foundations Intervention supplemented the usual practice of home visits by teachers and classroom staff that took place twice a year. Some families were able to converse with teachers and other classroom staff when they picked up and dropped off their children at the Head Start site. Children in other families used bus transportation to get to and from Head Start, so their families relied on telephone calls or written notes to teachers and classroom staff. The Foundations Intervention provided structure for intentional examination of all supports families needed. This helped make the Foundations Intervention a good match for what was in place at Head Start before the intervention.

Interactions among Head Start staff and families in this study showed evidence of what Turnbull (2010) calls partnership-oriented practice, in which families and professionals demonstrate “friendly relationship” practices such as (a) enhanced communication, (b) high expectations, and (c) commitment. Introduction of the Foundations Intervention fell on fertile ground in this Head Start program because of the staff and administration focus on family support. Participation in this intervention appears to have reinforced and enhanced these practices at deeper levels, as Lydia explained: “At first we didn't have that much to say to each other and now we always have something to say about how his goals are going or what happened at home last night.” Families and teachers made collaborative decisions through developing mutual goals and by sharing strategies and techniques. Tori gave an example of how Kyle's

participation in the intervention increased his engagement with his siblings while they were playing at home. “One of my favorite activities I do with the kids is to “paint” the house...we just take paint brushes and a couple of buckets of water and go out on the front porch and paint.”

Limitations

The first author’s roles as both the interviewer and the research team member who facilitated the intervention at this site may have introduced some bias in the responses of participants. Having a second research team member conduct follow-up interviews might have reduced this possibility of bias. We used peer debriefing to minimize this possibility. To reduce bias, the second research team member asked questions of the primary researcher about the linking of data and findings and the information’s usefulness to program staff.

The addition of follow-up interviews to determine sustainability and long-term partnership activities would have added detail and improved the credibility of the study. Although we relied on the perspective of only one administrator, that perspective was valuable because her expertise and experience contributed to a better understanding of the program due to her roles in teacher supervision and family support. In that sense, she was a “key informant” with unique and broad insight into the program (Creswell, 2007). The sample in this study includes families from diverse backgrounds. Although we sought participation from families whose first language is not English, we could not recruit the families due to scheduling conflicts, confidentiality of participants, staff shortages, and other factors. We obtained valuable information from the one father who did participate, especially since he had three children enrolled at the program. However, we would have benefited from the involvement of more fathers.

Implications for Practice

Despite this study’s initial and exploratory nature, its practice implications are apparent. A framework or model with specific strategies for goal development, such as the Foundations Intervention, may have potential for enhancing the family-professional partnership because it encourages sharing information. The importance of sharing information across home and school settings is consistent with findings in this study and other published studies (Blue-Banning et al, 2004; Brotherson et al., 2008). The short-term nature of the Foundations Intervention may enable families and professionals to target joint goals efficiently, in contrast to the annual goals developed for IEPs (Individual Education Plans). Further, the Foundations Intervention specifies mutual responsibilities for both parents and teachers, which also does not occur in the annual IEP meeting. Determining their own timelines for participation should help families and professionals build relationships with their partners at their own paces. Leadership to ensure partnership development (e.g., time to talk with families at their convenience, flexible work schedules) and professional development related to working with vulnerable families may also be important. To summarize, practical implications include using an intervention with specific strategies to ensure partnership and information shared across home and school. This study also shows that leadership could assist in improvement of interaction among families, children, and teachers through partnership and professional development.

Implications for Research

Future research should explore whether influences on the family-professional partnerships observed in this study are specific to this particular Head Start program or whether other Head Start programs share similar administrative structures that are welcoming to partnerships. The question of whether other preschool programs that are not Head Start organizations have orientations toward partnership that the Foundations Intervention can positively influence also needs investigation. Researchers could address how the Foundations Intervention might positively influence family-professional partnerships in other program models without the unique family-oriented practices present in Head Start.

The impact of the Foundations Intervention model on multiple program types will help researchers determine how to match programs to existing intervention practices. Greater sustainability and potential for fidelity to implementation might occur if researchers are able to identify critical pre-existing conditions that bode well for successful implementation (Fixsen, et al. 2005). Broader study of partnership interventions that are similar to the Foundations intervention has potential to strengthen understanding of how to continue improving family-professional partnerships (Turnbull, 2010).

CONCLUSION

This study explores the beliefs, attitudes, and administrative structures supporting family-professional partnership and how the Foundations Intervention influences the family-professional partnership in Head Start. Seven themes emerged from the data with respect to family-professional partnership. The first research question illuminated (a) the program's understanding of family-professional partnership, (b) national performance standards and program administrative structures emphasizing family support and participation, and (c) local Head Start leadership. The second research question illuminated (a) developing shared goals between the parent and the teacher; (b) shared knowledge about home and school environments; (c) collaborating in working towards the child's goals; and (d) interactions characterized by enhanced communication, high expectations, and commitment. Themes showed how the process shifted the course of the partnership in a positive direction through existing beliefs and administrative structures about family-professional partnerships and the use of the Foundations Intervention. Study results suggest that the Foundations Intervention positively influences family-professional partnership within this particular site and that further research could expand the impact of this partnership intervention.

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