

## Utilizing Participatory Action Research to Foster Effective Family/School Collaboration at an Urban PreK-8 Catholic School

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*This paper describes a study focused on promoting culturally responsive collaboration practices at an urban preK-8 Catholic school. Using participatory action research (PAR) as its framework, a team of school stakeholders and university faculty and students from the psychology department partnered to create a participant-driven data collection and analysis procedure that culminated in the implementation of a new communication mechanism judged by educators and parents to have led to significant improvements in family-school communications. Lessons learned from this experience, particularly as they relate to the use of PAR principles in an urban Catholic school, will be shared.*

In a recent edition of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, Cook and Simonds (2011), reflecting the core principle of charism, made a call for relationships to be the organizing element that distinguishes Catholic education. They define relationships broadly to include each individual's relationship with self, God, and others within a Catholic school community. Primary among these relationships is the collaboration between teacher and parent in the education and development of students. Frabutt, Holter, Nuzzi, Rocha, and Cassell (2010) note that "over 300 years of official Church teachings and documents affirm the importance of this home-school relationship, yet relatively little research has systematically explored the need and value of parent involvement in the school community" (p. 25). In a national survey of 1,047 pastors with parish schools, parent involvement was ranked fourth (out of 16 priority areas) in importance after Catholic identity, finances, and long-range planning. However, when asked to rate areas being currently addressed in their schools, parent involvement fell to eighth out of the 16 priority areas (Frabutt, et al., 2010). Pastors located in the inner city, moreover, were more likely to rate the importance of parental involvement in school governance and policy development higher than any other locations (except rural schools where parental involvement in school governance was also ranked highly, see

Frabutt, et al., 2010).

Further underscoring the necessity for more effective family engagement are some of the demographic changes that have occurred in urban Catholic schools in recent history. Urban Catholic schools have become more diverse, serving students and families of varying racial, ethnic, economic and religious backgrounds (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2006; McDonald & Schultz, 2009). In a snapshot of urban Catholic schools provided by Joseph O'Keefe and his colleagues (O'Keefe, Greene, Henderson, Connors, Goldschmidt, & Schervish, 2004), 40% of schools surveyed reported increases in minority student enrollment between 1995 and 2000. Hallinan and Kubitschek (2010) attribute this increasing diversity to the efforts of Catholic educators to draw upon a broader, nontraditional demographic to sustain inner city schools. Despite increasing diversity among students and families within Catholic school communities, staffs remain predominately White (72%) (O'Keefe, et al., 2004). The need to improve school-family collaboration is supported by research that suggests cultural barriers often exist between minority families and educators who are primarily White (Delpit, 1995; Harry, 2008). There is also evidence that student achievement can be improved across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines through more effective parental engagement (Esler, Godber, & Christenson, 2008). Given these findings, the need for new models of active collaboration between families and schools within the framework of Catholic education is apparent.

### **Participatory Action Research, Social Justice, and Family-School Collaboration**

The goal of this study was to use a socially just process to develop effective family-school collaboration practices at an urban Catholic school via a partnership between the school and graduate students and faculty affiliated with a school of education at a Catholic university. Social justice is not easily defined, but is associated in education with the idea that all individuals and groups must be treated with fairness and respect and that all are entitled to the resources and benefits that the school has to offer (North, 2006). Sander, Sharkey, Groomes, Krumholz, Walker, and Hsu (2011) offer the following definition:

Social justice is an advocacy-related construct that includes three specific, but not always distinct, ecological system qualities that promote educational success and psychological well-being: access to necessary

and appropriate resources, experiences of being treated with respect, and fairness.

In a recent article calling for more rigorous scholarship assessing the social justice impact of partnerships between Catholic universities and Catholic K-12 schools, Whipp and Scanlan (2009) laid out four primary questions to guide such initiatives:

1. Who is being served by these partnerships and who is being excluded?
2. To what extent are these partnerships enabling the partnering Catholic institutions to take specific actions that expand/maximize opportunities for students and families who have been traditionally marginalized in schools by barriers of race, socioeconomic class, language, and/or disability?
3. In what ways do these partnerships directly promote tangible manifestations of social justice in schools, such as improved student learning and reductions in barriers to learning for traditionally marginalized students?
4. How do these partnerships offer opportunities for students, faculty, and other stakeholders to link their actions for social justice with the growth and development of their religious faith? (Whipp & Scanlan, 2009, pp. 209-210)

This study was guided in large part by the first three of these questions. Consistent with the social justice ideas of treating others with fairness and respect, the overarching goal of this study was not to impose a university-driven model of family-school collaboration. Rather, the goal was to partner with the school to create a culturally responsive approach to school improvement that reflected the goals, assets, and unique attributes identified by key stakeholders. Participatory action research (PAR), with its philosophical stance that research should be done with people and not to people (Dworski-Riggs & Langhout, 2010; Evans, Prilleltensky, McKenzie, Prilleltensky, Nogueras, Huggins, & Mescia, 2011), provided the framework for addressing these issues through a socially just process.

The ultimate goal of PAR is “to build a community’s capacity to solve self-identified problems and to promote health and social justice” (Hughes, 2003, p. 41). In fostering active participation of stakeholders in the research

process, PAR strives to facilitate ownership of interventions across all stakeholder groups. The idea is that this kind of involvement will produce a commitment to culturally relevant and effective change that will be sustained after the completion of the project (Hughes, 2003; Nastasi, 2009). Conde-Frazier (2006) argues that PAR is particularly well-suited for religious educators due to its emphasis on social justice and community building. Additionally, given the egalitarian nature of the PAR approach, there are many examples of PAR being particularly well-suited to initiatives centered on fostering effective family-school partnerships in schools (Deslandes, 2006; Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006; Dworski-Riggs & Langhout, 2010; Ho, 2002).

While nonprescriptive, there are four action steps characteristic of the PAR approach (Stringer, 2007). The first step is “planning a research process.” At this stage, the primary goal is relationship building and laying the groundwork for effective collaboration. In the case of this study, the first stage involved identifying a school principal who shared a common understanding and vision with the university researchers regarding social justice, family-school collaboration, and eliciting and valuing family input. Once this connection was made, a work team was established and an overall approach to data collection was created.

The second step is “building a picture.” At this stage, the research team devises a methodology for gathering pertinent data that has the potential to advance the designated structure (in this case a preK-8 urban Catholic school) toward the shared goals and vision. In the third step, “interpreting and analyzing,” qualitative and quantitative data are analyzed utilizing an iterative process whereby tentative conclusions are brought to the research team and shared with stakeholders. These conclusions are then revised based on feedback from all parties. The final stage is “resolving problems and implementing sustainable solutions.” As with the other stages, the central idea in this stage is that those most affected by any “solution” should have significant say as to how interventions are implemented and (if judged to be effective) sustained. These four steps formed the framework for action for this study.

### Study Development and Rationale

The research study described in this article developed over time as part of a partnership between an urban Catholic university and a preK-8 Catholic school located in the same city. The partnership got its start when a university faculty member sought out recommendations for schools that might be open to engaging in a PAR project centered on promoting effective family-school collabora-

tion practices. Based on the university researcher's goals and approach, a colleague familiar with preK-12 Catholic education recommended the principal and school where this study took place. The decision to work with this school was based on three factors: 1.) the long-term stability of the school, which has been in operation for over 80 years and has continued despite the closure of the parish formerly attached to this school; 2.) the presence of a strong principal with an extensive history at the school; and, 3.) the possible alignment between the values and goals of the school principal and university faculty researcher as they relate to family-school collaboration and social justice.

In the fall of 2007, an initial meeting was held with the school principal and university researchers to discuss their vision for family-school collaboration. Through this dialogue, it became apparent that all parties shared a common goal to improve family-school collaboration using a methodology consistent with social justice principles. The next step was to recruit two teachers and two parents/family members to form a work team responsible for establishing the research agenda for the project. This team (school principal, two educators, two parents/family members, university faculty member, and four university graduate students) first met approximately two weeks later, at which time they agreed upon a shared vision of effective family-school collaboration. This group continued to meet approximately once a month for the next two and one-half years, ultimately devising a two-part research plan involving a needs assessment (described below as "Phase I") and intervention based on the results of the needs assessment ("Phase II").

### **Phase I: Needs Assessment Methods**

The needs assessment consisted of two stages. The first stage, which took place at the very end of the 2007-08 academic year, consisted of a parent survey. University team members compiled and analyzed the data utilizing item means and listing out all open-ended responses. The full work team (university and school) then met to discuss the main themes and take-aways from the results.

While the survey provided the opportunity to cover a wide variety of topics, it was understood from the outset that in starting with a survey the group was choosing to value breadth of information over depth. As such, the plan was to utilize the survey to identify potential priority topic areas and then follow up with focus groups in order to obtain more detailed information regarding these priority areas. Accordingly, the survey results (item means and the

work team's initial interpretations written in a few short paragraphs) were sent home to families and shared with all of the educators in the fall of 2008 with an invitation for feedback. The work team members then followed up with the groups they represented (e.g., the teachers led a discussion of survey results at a faculty meeting, the parents/family members sought out feedback from other parents/family members informally) to get their feedback on the work team's interpretation of the results. Based on stakeholder feedback, the work team felt that no substantial interpretive changes were required.

During the fall of 2008 focus group topic areas and protocols were created by the work team. Participants were recruited in early 2009, with results initially analyzed by the work team and then presented to the entire school community (following the same iterative stakeholder feedback process as occurred with survey results) for feedback in the spring of 2009.

### Participants

The participants in the needs assessment included parents and other adult family members (e.g., grandparents) of students who attend this school and the educators who teach at the school. The age of adult participants was not asked, but the estimated age range was approximately 22 to 70 years. While family member race and ethnicity was not asked, according to the school's principal 99% of the students at this school are African-American and 1% are Latino. The age of educators who participated in this study was not asked, but the estimated age range was approximately 24 to 70 years. According to the school's principal, there are 13 full-time educators at this school, 10 of whom are White, two who are African-American, and one Latino.

According to school records, there were approximately 150 families who had at least one child attending this school at the time the survey was administered (spring 2008). Approximately 75% ( $n=113$ ) of these families completed the survey. Of the participants who completed the survey, 23% had children in preK-K, 40.7% had children in first through third grade, 57% had children in fourth through eighth grade, and 9.7% had children who had graduated from this school (totals are more than 100% since some families had more than one child in the school). Four parent focus groups (with a total of 17 participating parents), and two teacher focus groups were held during the spring of 2009. All full-time teachers ( $n=13$ ) participated in the teacher focus groups.

## Instruments

The initial methodology used was a 32-question parent survey with two open-response questions. This survey, developed by the work team, was an adaptation of Sheldon and Epstein's (2007) well-validated "Parent Survey on Family and Community Involvement in the Elementary and Middle Grades." This instrument was modified for two primary reasons. First, work team members wanted to ask about some specific activities/components of the school that were not covered by Sheldon and Epstein's survey tool. Second, some questions were either modified or added to reflect the unique mission of a Catholic school (e.g., questions related to the school's religious environment).

The first open-response question asked respondents to list out the positive elements in the current way that faculty and staff at the school interact with families. The second question asked parents to provide specific examples of how faculty and staff could improve their collaboration with families. Space was provided on the survey for participants to include additional comments.

Focus group questions were framed around four sections: Communications; School Discipline; Learning Styles; and, Extracurriculars. These sections were created by the work team based on themes (see results section) that emerged from the initial survey findings. The focus group questions are provided in Appendix I.

## Phase I Findings

Survey results, arranged from highest to lowest mean response, are presented in Table 1. As the data from Table 1 indicates, the responses suggested that respondents were satisfied and had a favorable opinion of the school. On a scale of 1-5, with higher ratings indicating higher levels of satisfaction, the highest rated items tended to reflect the parents' overall view of the school and its Christian mission. Items that were rated somewhat less favorably (relative to other items on the survey) tended to have to do with specific elements of the school, such as the availability (or lack thereof) of extracurricular activities, the condition of the school building, and their child's view of their teacher.

Qualitative data from the two open-response questions shed light on these ratings, particularly in terms of areas for growth. On the positive side, there was consistently high regard for the academic curriculum and for the general sense of community within the school. A representative parent comment regarding academics was "they really emphasize a great academic curriculum. I

Table 1

*Parent Survey Quantitative Questions and Results- Phase I*

Survey Question	Mean
I am glad my child(ren) is a student at XXX school and not a public school	4.67
I feel that the Christian environment is a good thing about XXX	4.64
I feel welcome at school	4.61
I am kept informed of my child's progress academically	4.58
My child is taught to be responsible for his or her behavior	4.55
The principal is easy to reach	4.54
I am kept informed of what is going on at school	4.52
The academic standards and expectations for my child(ren) are high	4.50
I would recommend XXX school to other families or parents	4.50
I feel that my child's race/culture is recognized and celebrated	4.49
I feel that my child is safe while at school	4.49
The principal is approachable	4.47
The teachers are easy to reach	4.47
I feel the teachers are approachable	4.45
The teachers care about my child(ren)	4.45
My child can get extra help from his or her teacher when needed	4.44
Any questions I ask are fully answered	4.41
I feel that the staff respect cultural diversity	4.41
I feel that my family is treated fairly	4.40
I feel that the teachers respect my role as a parent	4.34
My child(ren) is happy to be attending school	4.31
My child/ren's work is graded fairly	4.24
Overall satisfaction with XXX school	4.23
The discipline strategies are appropriate and adequate	4.18
My child receives an appropriate amount of homework most nights	4.15
My child(ren) is happy with his or her teacher	4.07
I would like to be more involved at school	4.06
We need more things for the children to do after school	3.97
The extracurricular activities offered benefit my child	3.92
I am satisfied with the extracurricular opportunities for my child	3.87
I am satisfied with the condition of the building and facilities	3.66
I have to assist my child in order for him or her to complete the homework	3.30

1= strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree

appreciate it.” In a representative comment about the school community, another parent wrote, “They know all children by name—also parents and grandparents. When my child is promoted they know the teacher and the teacher knows my child. It’s comforting.”

Conversely, when participants were asked to describe how they view collaboration between families and staff at the school, gaps in communication were frequently cited. Sometimes these gaps related to perceived inconsistencies between teachers in how they approach communication with parents. Wrote one parent, “Ensure that follow up information is clear and correct. Sometimes you are given different information from different teachers.”

Additionally, many parent respondents indicated that they desired more frequent communication from their children’s teachers. Many times parents did not specify a specific topic area that they desired more frequent communication about (“communicate with parents more” was a common response). When parents did specify, the most common areas where more effective communication would be helpful included student behavior and student learning styles. For example, one parent said simply “contact parents when there is a problem with behavior.” Other parents were a bit more detailed, such as one who wrote, “I feel that some of the teachers need to access each child’s individual characteristics when judging or assessing him.” Another parent wrote that “some teachers may be too quick to judge” in reference to students’ learning styles and behaviors.

Based on participant responses and discussions within the project work team and between team members and school stakeholders, four major themes emerged that indicated potential areas for improvement: communication; school discipline; learning styles; and, extracurriculars. These content areas became the organizing framework for the focus groups that followed the survey.

Appendix I includes the focus group questions and prompts. Based on guidelines provided by Ritchie and Lewis (2003), the approach to data analysis was an inductive constant comparison analysis. In this process, results from each focus group were reviewed independently by two university coders. The two coders each listed the topics that they felt best captured the broad themes that emerged from the interviews. Once this was done, the coders came together and discussed the broad themes identified and developed consensus on the language used for each identified theme.

Through this process, the primary theme identified by all focus groups was an interest in improved communication between parents and teachers. “Improved communication” typically referred to both frequency and content.

In the focus groups, parents stressed that they would like to know pertinent information (e.g., if their child was perceived by the teacher to be struggling academically and/or behaviorally) as early as possible so they can support the teacher and their child. Here is how one parent described her experiences:

When there's a problem, I have had a few incidents with my son and they tell him that he needs to tell me, but if he's in trouble he's not going to tell me so then I don't know. Then I send him to school the next day with his grandmother who is disabled, and they say he wasn't supposed to come back to school until he notifies his mother, and I'm like, well, I didn't know because the school didn't notify me... regardless of how much responsibility [we're trying] to teach the child, still notify me as the parent.

Added another parent,

As far as the communication and respect, I think the teachers need to know if it's an ongoing issue they have to take time to let the parents know because if we don't know then we can't address it. If we don't know then we can't solve the problem. If we don't know then it's going to continue to be an ongoing problem and the problem will never be fixed and we want to fix the problem.

Teachers also expressed that at times it is challenging to connect with parents by phone or in person during the hours teachers have available. Said one teacher:

[a barrier to communicate with parents is that] some parents don't have computers... some parents don't work hours conducive to get to a meeting after school or before school because they don't work an 8-5 office job and they work in careers where if you don't work you don't get paid. And so there's not an incentive to take time off work to come to school because it's costing a lot of money.

In summary, through the needs assessment process based on PAR principles, communication emerged as a primary theme area. Accordingly, the work team began to focus on potential interventions that might improve communication between families and staff at the school.

## **Phase II: Intervention Methods**

Once the needs assessment was completed, the work team met to discuss possible interventions that had the potential to improve family/school communication. Based on the recurrent theme of both parents and educators desiring more frequent communication, particularly when the student was believed to be struggling in some way, the team determined that a weekly update form would be the first intervention implemented at this school. Specifically, the plan called for teachers to provide weekly update forms on each individual student that parents were expected to sign and return with their own feedback. These update forms were not meant to replace direct conversation, but rather to serve as a mechanism for both teachers and parents to stay in regular contact. If a student was failing a class, for instance, parents would have several written indicators from the teacher that the student was struggling. Similarly, if a parent had a concern with something going on in the classroom, they would have several opportunities to voice their concerns in writing.

### **Participants**

Fifty-eight (38.7% of eligible participants) family members completed the formative survey in the fall of 2009. Fifty-eight (38.7%) family members participated in summative individual interviews in May 2010. However, two of these parent interviews were voided—one because the interviewee's response was not audible and the other because, upon listening to the audio playback, it became evident that the respondent was speaking about report cards, not the update forms. Additionally, ten educators (76.9%) and the school's principal participated in the May 2010 interviews.

### **Instruments**

The formative survey (administered in October 2009) consisted of five closed-ended questions developed by the work team. These questions related to the perceived frequency and effectiveness of the update forms. The summative individual interviews (administered in May 2010) consisted of four open-ended questions for teachers and parents and five open-ended questions for the school principal. All questions related to participants' overall evaluation of these update forms. These questions are provided in Appendix II.

## Procedure

In close coordination with the school principal and project work team, the update sheets began during the 2009-10 academic year. The principal presented this plan to educators at a faculty meeting prior to the start of the school year. A teacher who was part of the project work team then led a discussion with her colleagues during this same meeting on how best to implement this plan. It was at this point, based on teacher feedback that weekly updates would be too cumbersome, that it was decided that each teacher would provide update sheets at a rate of at least once every two weeks (some elected to complete these weekly) and that each teacher would create their own template. All teachers were required to provide individualized written feedback and all forms provided space for parental signature and comments. The teacher on the project work team was tasked with obtaining ongoing feedback from other educators as to the acceptability, practicality, and overall effectiveness of these update forms. Feedback was obtained through informal “check-ins” with all of the other teachers individually during the first few weeks of the intervention. The intervention also became a semi-regular topic (goal was approximately once a month) of discussion in the faculty’s weekly meetings.

Simultaneously, this new intervention was explained to parents via the school’s newsletter and family representatives on the work team were tasked with gathering ongoing feedback and input from parents. Both team members had been affiliated with this school for many years and had extensive connections with many other school families. Finally, the principal was tasked with seeking out ongoing input from both educators and parents. This was primarily done informally, although the principal made a point at several large gatherings to discuss the intervention and solicit feedback.

The work team met monthly throughout the 2009-2010 academic year to assess progress, address challenges, and make any adjustments to the intervention based on feedback provided by educators and parents. The PAR framework was used to ensure open communication and collaboration with stakeholders throughout the school regarding the purpose and procedures of the intervention. However, given that the update forms were ultimately mandated by the principal, the work team was particularly sensitive to stakeholder feedback at the outset and was prepared to clarify, modify, and/or stop the intervention based on stakeholder wishes. For example, some educators initially used the updates like report cards (perhaps because at first the forms were

labeled as “progress reports.” The terminology was switched to “update forms” early on in the intervention once this challenge was identified). Similarly, in the beginning many families did not sign the update sheets indicating that they had received the teacher feedback.

### Phase II Findings

As depicted in Table 2, parental survey feedback in October 2009 (approximately two months into the intervention) indicated that the vast majority of respondents felt that the update forms were helpful, that teachers regularly provided them with feedback utilizing these forms, and that the forms provided stronger opportunities for regular communication and more effective collaboration between families and teachers. Additionally, consistent with the anecdotal feedback received by the project team, while the majority of parents reported that they either “always” or “usually” provided feedback to teachers about their children using these forms, 26.3% indicated that they only

Table 2

*School/Teacher Numbers Included in the Survey and Survey Response Rates*

	Never (n=58)	Sometimes (n=58)	Usually (n=58)	Always (n=58)	Mean
How often do teachers provide meaningful feedback about your child on the newly implemented student update forms?	2 (3.4%)	2 (3.4%)	9 (15.5%)	45 (77.6%)	3.67
How often have the newly implemented student update forms been helpful to you as a parent?	0 (0%)	2 (3.5%)	16 (28.1%)	39 (68.4%)	3.65
How often do you provide feedback about your child on the newly implemented student update forms?	1 (1.8%)	15 (26.3%)	16 (28.1%)	25 (43.9%)	3.14
<i>Based on a Likert scale where 1 = Never and 4 = Always</i>					
	Never (n=58)	Sometimes (n=58)	Usually (n=58)	Always (n=58)	Mean
The newly implemented student update forms create stronger opportunities for regular communication/collaboration between families and teachers	5 (8.6%)	1 (1.7%)	12 (20.7%)	40 (69.0%)	3.50
The newly implemented student update forms create stronger opportunities for effective communication/collaboration between families and teachers	5 (8.6%)	1 (1.7%)	10 (17.2%)	42 (72.4%)	3.53

*Based on a Likert scale where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 4 = Strongly Agree*

“sometimes” provided feedback using these forms and 1.8% indicated that they “never” provided feedback to teachers using these forms.

In May 2010, summative parent interviews were completed and data was coded using a process identical to the one employed in analyzing the results from the spring 2009 focus groups. The overall sentiment was quite positive, with no parents recommending that the forms be eliminated. The update forms were commonly viewed as effective due to the value of their content (depth and relevance) and their consistency. As one parent said,

It’s working and it’s keeping the parents up to date on how the child is doing in school: grades and behavior. It’s also giving you first-hand experience because you’re looking at all the work.

Added another parent:

I receive them every week and I really like that so actually I look forward to getting it every week...it helps to improve his schoolwork and his behavior.

A third parent commented:

It is more in depth, it lets me know how my daughter is doing on a weekly basis, it lets me know how good she’s doing in class, how she’s participating because if anything is wrong I can see it in the progress report, it’s a good thing I can see this every week.

Another theme that emerged through the parent interviews was that these forms represented a significant improvement from their prior experiences at other schools. As one grandfather commented:

It’s a big step above the previous school, it’s allowed a better exchange of ideas best for getting [student’s name] situated in a balanced school system...it is achieving its goals because there’s a better understanding of her needs, her shortcomings, but more so how to be able to utilize that added energy she has into a positive manner for her.

Added another parent of two children in the school:

The communication is great...this is my first year at this school, but compared to other schools it is a big difference, it's better. Most other schools, from my experience, don't do progress reports. They do them when they have to, but not all the time.

Many parents spoke to the value of these reports as a prevention mechanism in terms of becoming aware of a potential problem before it is too late (a common complaint in Phase I focus groups). As one parent said,

I like it...Before I didn't know until report cards came out and that was a problem. So now I can enforce help, see where their week is at, and come to the school and work together and improve. My child improved...so it worked out...this [progress report] enhanced it and it helped...I recommend to keep this.

Added another parent:

I found them very informative and it gave us a chance to see how he's doing before it's too late so he could work on improvement. So I thought they were very good, it was a very good idea. It helped us a lot to keep him on track.

A final theme that emerged from the parent interviews was improved relationships with teachers. As one parent stated:

The progress report shows us the teachers are concerned, but also how we can improve ourselves at home with children working with the teachers here...I think the progress reports are so helpful, I give them 100 percent.

### **Educator Interviews**

Using a coding and analysis process that was identical to the focus group data analysis, it became clear that these update forms were popular with teachers. For example, all 10 teachers who were interviewed stated that they wanted to continue the update forms in the future. Additionally, all but one of the interviewed teachers stated they think the forms contributed to enhanced relationships and interactions with families. Overall, all of the teachers interviewed

stated that the forms achieved their goal of improved school-family collaboration. Stated one teacher, "I think it was good because it gave me a lot more communication with the parents than I would have normally had." Added another teacher,

I definitely think it comes [with] a more open line of communication so that at least the parents know you are taking the time and they know a little bit of what's going whereas before when I didn't do the progress reports there wasn't as much open communication.

### Principal Interview

The school principal stated that the update forms achieved their goal because it kept parents informed and improved student awareness of their progress in school. The principal also said the forms provided families more reasons to visit the school and talk to staff members. Overall, parent involvement during the intervention year was greater than in the past, resulting in fewer conflicts between parents and teachers. The principal noted that the update forms "reduced the number of parents saying they didn't know their child was [or wasn't] doing well." Regarding the PAR process and how it played out, the principal stated that engaging parents through focus groups, surveys, and interviews was a primary factor in increasing family-school collaboration. Families felt heard and there were clear channels for them to voice their insights and feelings:

You can have a blind spot and think you are doing a great job and parents don't know what's going on...anything that can help us improve in that area is great, allowing parents to provide feedback and let them know we are working with their children.

Moving forward, the principal said that she really would like to increase the percentage of parents who provided regular writing on the forms. She stated:

I think teachers will look at this again and see if there is another way to get more feedback from the parents, though we are realistic enough to know that parents are busy, so if the report is good they may not say much, but if it isn't then they might come up. But we will try to encour-

age parents with a comment, 'we would like to see you, please come up.' It's healthy for the parents, and the end result is it's best for the children and that's what we are about.

### Discussion

In an article on the challenges inherent in systemic school change involving sustained program implementation, Noell and Gansle (2009) note that it is much easier to talk about change than it is to accomplish change. Indeed, while it appears that this study's findings indicate that participants in this project were successful in creating change, it is also true that, to the extent success was achieved, it was achieved slowly and with much attention to relationship building. It is also likely that many opportunities were missed. In the following sections, we consider the data obtained and our personal experiences with PAR in a preK-8 Catholic school.

### Lessons Learned from the Family-School Collaboration

One of the appealing features about this school as a potential research site was its enduring link to the surrounding community. While the parish is gone, the school has persevered for decades and there is a strong sense of community that multiple university team members felt almost immediately upon entering the school. Despite these positive attributes, the school was not immune to problems in family-school relations. While typically not expressed overtly, there were (at least to the university researchers) some undertones of distrust between teachers (particularly newer teachers) and families (particularly families with younger parents) expressed in the focus groups and interviews. There were mutual frustrations among both family members and teachers regarding the level of engagement and the sharing of information between parents and the school. Similarly, some of the most lively and poignant comments provided by parents spoke to their perception that they and/or their children were often misinterpreted by teachers. As research suggests, such miscommunication is not uncommon when there are clear cultural barriers between educators and families (Harry, 2008; Li & Vazquez-Nuttall, 2009).

When looking at lessons learned from the data and from this overall experience, there were two primary areas of success. First, the PAR framework, with its emphasis on transparency, collaboration, and communication, can

be viewed as a positive intervention given the disconnect identified by some teachers and parents, and the inherent centrality of relationships and parental engagement in mission of Catholic schools (Cook & Simonds, 2011; Frabutt et al., 2010). Additionally, consistent with core social justice tenets, several teachers and families noted throughout the project that they felt respected and empowered when asked to be involved in school-based issues. Many families also noted that they felt very respected when the results of their feedback was shared with them and action steps were taken based on this feedback.

The second perceived area of success is that the intervention developed through the PAR process was simple and flexible. While a minority of parents stated that they wished the update forms were more frequent and detailed and a minority of teachers stated that they wished they were completed less frequently, a consistent finding across all stakeholders was that the forms were practical and useful. It seems reasonable to deduce that part of the success of this intervention related to its usefulness for all involved. While team members felt that the participatory nature of this process set the stage for the intervention in terms of stakeholder preparation and buy-in, it is extremely likely that if the intervention selected by the project team and then refined by stakeholders was either too cumbersome to be implemented or if it was easy to implement but not relevant to stakeholders, a much less positive outcome would have occurred.

### **Lessons Learned from the School/University Collaboration**

Esler, Godber, and Christenson (2008) argue that relationship building for effective school-family collaboration is an intentional process that takes much time and effort, and is dependent upon clear administrative support. Indeed, the university researchers involved in the project believe that much of the success, as well as some of the missed opportunities, stemmed from the relationship with the school's principal. To put it bluntly, if this project did not have the strong support of the school's principal, it would have never gotten off the ground. Similarly, none of the action steps described in this paper would have occurred without the principal's visible and tacit support and without the high regard in which the principal was held by school stakeholders.

While this arrangement had many obvious advantages, there also were some limitations to having such a dominant figure in a collaborative process. For example, at the outset the university researchers had a goal of helping to establish a parent/family group (the school did not have an organized structure

for families to work together) as part of a vision for increased family engagement. The school principal, while clearly supportive of individual families and open to input from families as to ways the school could be stronger, was not on board with this recommendation. While the university faculty researcher initially wanted this idea to be discussed within the project team, the researcher ultimately did not press the issue after it became clear that this idea was a nonstarter for the principal. Disagreements on a project team are not uncommon or undesirable, but when one team member holds great power within the group there is a tendency to follow this person's vision.

Similarly, as university researchers, it was challenging at times to straddle the line between promoting what we felt to be sound research practices versus being responsive to the principal's vision. Ultimately, the principal supported the researchers' suggestions in terms of methodology employed (content was always a shared enterprise, which was a perceived strength of this project), but there were times when the responsibilities and future directions of the project felt (at least to the university researchers) somewhat unclear. In retrospect, the researchers wish they had a much more overt discussion with the principal and the rest of the work team on this topic at the start of the study, rather than engaging in this discussion in response to specific decision points.

Finally, while it is believed that this project could have been successful if the researchers were affiliated with a non-Catholic university, the fact that the researchers were from a Catholic university (with many of the graduate students in the research group being alumni of Catholic primary and secondary schools) clearly was seen as a strength by the school's principal and by many at the school. In this sense, it was felt that both the collaborative nature of the project and the shared affiliation with Catholic education provided an enhanced opportunity for a productive university and school research partnership to occur.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations that one might consider when forming inferences from the data obtained. First, the very nature of PAR, with its emphasis on stakeholder-driven decision making, limits generalizability of findings. Thus, while the core principles and processes of a PAR study have similarities and consistencies across projects, it cannot be inferred that the intervention that appeared to be successful in this study would necessarily be effective at a similar Catholic school, particularly if this intervention was not preceded by

a process in which stakeholder data was actively solicited and valued.

While the researchers' position as "outsiders" likely resulted in many advantages, particularly in terms of their ability to ask questions and to analyze data more objectively (e.g., the researchers did not have any preconceived notions about the personalities and/or motivations of teachers and families affiliated with this school), this position also had some limitations. For example, the family and teacher work team members were selected by the principal, so it was not always clear to the university researchers how representative these committee members were of the groups they represented.

Another limitation of this study is a lack of objective baseline data (e.g., attendance rates, student achievement scores, discipline referral data) from the year preceding the initiation of the update forms. The university research team probed for such measures, but this data simply did not exist. Consequently, the study was unable to analyze what impact, if any, the intervention had on student outcomes. While the formative and summative data obtained consistently pointed to the success of the intervention, much of this data is based on perceived effectiveness on the part of stakeholders, which may be influenced by processes such as the social validity of the intervention. This is not to say that these perceptions are inaccurate, but rather that the lack of objective data to support or perhaps contradict these subjective reports hinders the ultimate strength of the conclusions formed.

A final limitation of this study is the lack of involvement on the part of the students attending this school. While these students' voices are arguably heard indirectly through student feedback reflected by families, teachers, and the school principal, it is believed that this project would have been stronger if students were active participants in project planning and decision making. Student participation was raised as a desirable option by the university researchers at the start of the study, but this suggestion was clearly not supported by the rest of the project team and the issue was dropped.

### Conclusion

While it is clear that effective family-school collaboration reflects the core values of Catholic education (Frabutt et al., 2009), there is a gap in research describing mechanisms for developing and sustaining such collaboration in urban Catholic schools. This study provides an example of one promising approach. Using PAR as the organizing framework, a representative team of

school- and university-based partners lead a continuous data collection and analysis process over two years that resulted in a new communication protocol that was judged by all stakeholders to be valuable and effective. This project would not have succeeded without the strong and consistent support of the school's principal, who was an incredibly powerful, kind, and effective figure in the school. Similarly, it is believed that the combination of a transparent process with a simple yet effective intervention paid major dividends. While there were some missed opportunities, this project is an example of how students and faculty from a Catholic university, along with families, teachers, and administrators from a Catholic preK-8 school, can work together effectively to address school-based issues and advance the core values of Catholic education.

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## Appendix I

### Focus Group Questions

#### Questions for Educators:

**Opening Question:** Please tell us a little bit about how you came to work at this School.

How many years have you been in education and how many years have you taught at XXX?

#### **Topic # 1: Communication with families**

Teachers communicate with families in many different ways. We would like to learn more about communication with parents in your classroom. Please talk a little about this topic.

How are challenging behaviors and/or student successes communicated to families?

Tell me about some barriers that you face in your communication with families.

#### **Topic # 2: Classroom discipline**

There are many different strategies teachers use to run an effective classroom with minimal behavior issues. Please talk about how you approach discipline in your classroom.

What type of behaviors do you see and how do you handle them?

Which of these behaviors do you see most frequently and how are they handled?

#### **Topic # 3: Awareness of different learning styles**

Children enter the classroom with different learning needs. Please talk about different learning needs in your classroom and how you approach meeting those needs.

How do you approach a student who is falling behind?

Tell me about barriers you face in your approach toward students' diverse learning needs.

What kinds of support do you have or need in meeting each student's needs?

### Questions for Parents

**Opening Question:** Please tell us a little bit about how you came to select XXX as the place where you sent your child or children to school.

For how many years have you had one or more children attending XXX?  
How many children do you presently have at XXX and what grade(s) are these students currently in?

#### **Topic #1: Communication from teachers**

Teachers and families communicate with each other in many different ways. Tell me about how teachers communicate with you and your family.

How does XXX involve you and your family in decisions about your child?  
Tell me about barriers you face when working with XXX?

#### **Topic #2: Discipline and fairness**

On the survey, some parents wrote about the importance of respect and fairness in the way teachers discipline students. Please talk about this at XXX.

How do you feel about how behavior is handled in your child's classroom?

#### **Topic #3: Adapting to children's learning styles**

Children learn in many different ways. Please tell me about your child's learning needs and if these needs are being met in the classroom?

How do teachers involve you and your family in your child's learning?

#### **Topic #4: Extracurricular activities**

On the survey, some parents indicated the importance of extracurricular activities that were convenient and meaningful for you and your family. If your child participates in extracurricular activities, have you felt that they have been beneficial to your child and are convenient for your family?

If your child doesn't participate in extracurricular activities, please tell me more about why he or she isn't involved currently.

Tell me ways to increase the opportunity for your child to be involved at XXX.

How can XXX create a greater community-focused atmosphere for your family?

**Closing Question:** What is the most important thing that you would like for us to take from this group interview?

## Appendix II

### Summative Individual Interview Questions with Parents, Educators, and School Principal

#### Questions for Parents

**Opening Question:** Tell me about your experience with the progress reports this year.

**Follow-Up Questions:**

1. Did this communication system achieve its goals? Why or why not?
2. Have you noticed any difference in your relationship with your child's teacher(s) this year and, if so, do you feel that this communication system played a role in this change?
3. What recommendations would you make related to teacher/family communication for next year?

#### Questions for Educators

**Opening Question:** Tell me about your experience with the progress reports this year.

**Follow-Up Questions:**

1. Did this communication system achieve its goals? Why or why not?
2. Have you noticed any difference in your relationship with your students' families this year and, if so, do you feel that this communication system played a role in this change?
3. What recommendations would you make related to teacher/family communication for next year?

#### Questions for School Principal

**Opening Question:** Why was it important for you to focus on family/school collaboration at XXX?

**Follow-Up Questions:**

1. Tell me about your experience with the progress reports this year.
2. Did this communication system achieve its goals? Why or why not?
3. Have you noticed any difference in the nature and quality of family/teacher

interactions this year and, if so, do you feel that this communication system played a role in this change?

4. Do you feel that XXX is on the right track when it comes to family/school collaboration? What recommendations would you make related to teacher/family communication for next year?