

“MISSING” PARENTS: WHAT ARE *WE* MISSING?
ENGAGING PARENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS

by

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Abstract

In this capstone project I examine the extant literature focused on attracting, retaining and engaging “missing” parents in early childhood education and parenting programs. I am concerned that many children are experiencing significant adjustment issues upon kindergarten entry. These children are thought to be lacking early learning opportunities although many opportunities exist in our school district. Thus, I seek to understand why parents may not be attending or sustaining their attendance in early childhood education programs designed for themselves and their children. Two theoretical frameworks, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979) and Moll’s funds of knowledge framework (2005), guide this project. I also study three parent involvement models: Comer’s model for reforming education (1996); Epstein’s model for family involvement (2011); and Landy and Menna’s approach with multi-risk families (2006). I explore the New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English (2008) to examine its discourse on parental involvement in early childhood education programs. I search for promising practices to attract, retain and engage “missing” parents. I focus on the courage required by parents to enter into unknown situations in the best interest of their children. I express my hope that this capstone project will spark discussion, innovation and change to current practices, resulting in increased engagement of “missing” parents and children.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In this capstone project I review the extant literature on parental involvement in early childhood education and parenting programs. In particular, I examine barriers to parental participation and I explore promising practices to attract, retain and engage parents. I intend my capstone project to provide insight into why parents are “missing” opportunities for themselves and their young children and what service providers may be “missing” when attempting to attract, retain and engage parents in their programs. I am optimistic that my project will encourage new ways of working with parents to realize their engagement.

Next, I share the context and my professional background related to this capstone project.

Context and Personal Background

I currently work for the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development as a director of early childhood services in a school district. This director’s position includes leadership and oversight of several programs and services designed for young children and their parents. My leadership experience also includes directing a community-based early intervention program for ten years and, prior to that, four years of directing a family support program for parents and children, age six to twelve years. I am passionate about providing quality early learning opportunities for parents and their young children, especially children living in poverty who lack early learning opportunities afforded many of their peers. The early learning opportunities in our district are intended to support positive parenting skills, enhance children’s and parents’ overall well-being, and support a positive and confident start to kindergarten.

In my experience, many families we wish would attend our district’s early childhood education programs do not. I have a desire to understand why this may be happening. These programs are voluntary and thus, parents choose whether to attend or not. The literature on this

topic reveals that families at greatest risk are those least likely to be involved in early years programs (Cullingford & Morrison, 2010; Heinrichs, Bertram, Kuschel, & Hahlweg, 2005; Jack, DiCenso, & Lohfeld, 2002; Larocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011).

I began this Master's in Education degree program at UBC with a different capstone project in mind. I intended to study the best experiences to provide children who lack opportunities prior to kindergarten entry. My desire was to support a confident and smooth start to kindergarten for all children. Throughout my studies and with additional work experience, I came to realize that the best options for children would not matter if early childhood educators were unable to attract, retain, and engage their parents. And thus, I changed the focus of my capstone project.

I next define key terms that are found in, and are relevant to, this capstone project.

Key Terms

The key terms found in this project are: early childhood education programs; family; parents; attracting; retaining; parent engagement; parenting programs; "missing" parents; barriers; and promising practices.

In this project, *early childhood education programs* refers to activities and experiences that are designed to support children's healthy growth and development prior to kindergarten entry (Encyclopedia of Children's Health, 2017). The terms *family* and *parent* refer to "the significant others who are the child's caregiver and provider" (Lueder, 2011, p. 2). *Attracting* refers to the methods utilized by early childhood education and parenting programs to draw parents' attention to, register for and begin attending their services (Axford, Lehtonen, Kaoukji, Tobin & Berry, 2012). *Retaining* refers to efforts made to maintain the attendance of parents once services have begun (McCurdy & Daro, 2001). The term *parent engagement* is action oriented, referring to parents who observably participate through dialogue and action; share their knowledge, skills, and talents;

implement newly learned strategies; seek information; seize opportunities for themselves and their children; act as ambassadors; provide feedback; and/or contribute to decision-making (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). *Parenting programs* is defined as programs planned for parents and caregivers to “provide information about interactions with their infants and young children and enhance their sense of support from other parents” (Landy & Menna, 2006, p. 251). “*Missing*” *parents* refers to parents who are not in attendance in early childhood education and parenting programs and are perceived by service providers as parents who would benefit from engagement in these opportunities (Coe, Gibson, Spencer, & Stuttaford, 2008). The term *barriers* refers to factors that prevent parents from participating in services, described by Axford et al. (2012) as the reasons “why such programs are often difficult for parents to use” (p. 2061). Lastly, the term *promising practices* speaks to practices found in the extant literature that demonstrate desired and/or definite results (Epstein, 2011).

In the next section, I introduce the theoretical frameworks that inform this capstone project.

Overview of the Theoretical Frameworks

To foster an understanding of parental involvement and engagement, I begin by examining two theoretical frameworks that are grounded in social constructivism. In the first framework, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of development, I study the relationships within and between the various ecological systems (e.g. families and early learning programs, families and the neighborhood they inhabit, and children and their parents' workplace) and their impact on parents and their young children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In the second theoretical framework, Moll's funds of knowledge framework, I seek to understand how parents' funds of knowledge influence trust, reciprocity and balance of power in the parent/educator relationship (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992).

I expand on these theoretical frameworks in Chapter 2.

Parent Involvement Models

I examine three parent involvement models: 1) Comer's model for reforming education to increase my understanding of collaborative relationships between educators and parents (Comer, Haynes, Joyner & Ben-Avie, 1996); 2) Epstein's model of six types of family involvement to build my awareness of how school, family and community relationships enhance the well-being of children and promote positive outcomes (Epstein, 2011); and 3) Landy and Menna's integrative approach with multi-risk families, to learn about an individualized approach with families that recognizes strengths and addresses needs (Landy & Menna, 2006).

The New Brunswick Curriculum Framework

In addition to the theoretical frameworks and parent involvement models, I review the NB Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English (2008) and support documents

to study the Framework's discourse on parental involvement in early childhood education programs (Early Childhood Centre, University of New Brunswick).

Next, I introduce the comprehensive literature review undertaken for this project.

Introduction to the Literature Review

The literature selected for review involves mainly research studies identifying the most common barriers parents face when accessing early childhood education and parenting programs, including the studies of Avis, Bulman, and Leighton (2007); Barlow, Kirkpatrick, Stewart-Brown, and Davis (2005); Coe et al. (2008); Mendez, Carpenter, LaForett, and Cohen (2009); and Underwood and Killoran (2012). In addition, the literature recognizes promising practices to attract, retain and engage parents. For example, practical support as a promising practice was mentioned in the studies of Larocque et al. (2011) and Taylor, Mills, Schmied, Dahlen, Shuiringa, and Hudson (2012). The need for emotional support as a promising practice was highlighted in the works of Axford et al. (2012) and Warren, Hong, Leung Rubin, and Uy (2009).

I expand on the topics of barriers and promising practices in Chapter 2.

Next, I explain my rationale and the importance of this topic in the field of early childhood education.

Rationale and Importance

I believe that children and their parents benefit from being engaged in early childhood education and parenting programs and that this involvement eases their transition to formal schooling. I often hear colleagues speak of children having difficulty adjusting to kindergarten, and many of these children are identified as lacking early learning opportunities prior to kindergarten entry. My wish for all children is to enter kindergarten with "a zest for living and learning" (Early Childhood Centre, University of New Brunswick, 2008, p. 1).

As a director of early childhood services, I am aware that many early learning opportunities exist in our school district, free of charge, for parents and their young children. I am also aware, through conversations with service providers, that families seemingly most in need of these opportunities are not attending or sporadically attending these programs. Recognizing the potential and significant learning gap for children at-risk, Neuman (2009) stated “it is not the ability to learn that these children lack, but the knowledge, experiences, language and opportunities for learning” (p. xi). Thus, in the best interest of all children having the opportunity to get off to a strong start in life, this capstone project is a search for reasons why parents may not be attracted to, retained in, or engaged in these early learning opportunities. As importantly, this capstone project also highlights promising practices to build parental engagement.

Purpose and Guiding Questions

The purpose of this capstone project is to explore the extant literature on attracting, retaining, and engaging parents in early childhood education and parenting programs. I seek to understand why some parents are not attending or sustaining their attendance in programs designed for themselves and their young children. As I examine the literature, I look for identified barriers and promising practices. I intend to share findings with a network of early childhood service providers to build awareness, promote dialogue, and encourage reflective practices. Two questions guide this capstone project:

1. What does the extant literature reveal about ways service providers can attract, retain, and engage parents who are currently “missing” from early learning opportunities for themselves and their children? and

2. In what ways does the literature on barriers to parental engagement facilitate an understanding and potentially lead to the increased engagement of “missing” parents and children?

Summary and Organization of the Project

In Chapter 1, I briefly introduce the theory and relevant extant literature that informs my capstone project. I explain the motivation behind this capstone project; share key terms; present two theoretical frameworks, three models of parent involvement and a curriculum framework that inform my project; provide findings from a comprehensive review of extant literature; comment on the project’s importance, rationale and purpose; and, identify two questions that guide my project.

In Chapter 2, I expand on the theoretical frameworks and research literature and share findings on barriers to parental participation and promising practices to attract, retain and engage parents.

In Chapter 3, I connect research with practice, bringing forth practical suggestions to attract, retain, and engage “missing” parents. In Chapter 3, I also introduce my presentation intended for a network of early childhood service providers in our school district.

In Chapter 4, I provide a brief summary and reflection, highlight limitations of this capstone project, and identify next steps.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I examine two theoretical frameworks, three models of family engagement, and an early learning and child care curriculum framework to gain insight into barriers and to identify promising practices to attract, retain, and engage “missing” parents in early learning opportunities. The theoretical frameworks and models are grounded in social constructivism, understanding that individuals make sense of their world by being and interacting with others (Creswell, 2009). Moreover, the models and literature utilized naturalistic research methods, demonstrating “reality is seen in the complex dance of beings in relationships on multiple levels, and it is, in part, created by people” (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001, p. 36). In the literature reviewed, researchers were able to converse directly with parents and service providers, gaining increased insight and a deeper understanding by being exposed to their experiences of barriers and promising practices.

As introduced in Chapter 1, the two theoretical frameworks examined for this capstone project were Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory of development (1979) and Moll’s funds of knowledge framework (2005). In addition, three parent involvement models were studied, namely Comer’s model for reforming education (1996), Epstein’s model of six types of family involvement (2011), and Landy and Menna’s integrative approach with multi-risk families (2006). Moreover, the NB Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English and support documents (2008) were scrutinized for apparent values on family involvement and practical advice to enhance parental engagement. Lastly, a comprehensive review of extant literature revealed both barriers and promising practices to build family involvement.

Ecological Systems Theory of Development

Recognizing that environments affect children's healthy growth and development, Bronfenbrenner (1979) examined the relationships within and between the various ecological systems that children experience. A crucial relationship for children, the parent/child relationship, was thought to be dependent on the stressors and supports experienced by parents, their financial situation, their neighborhoods, their culture, their beliefs and their values (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). To visualize the ecological systems of a family, Bronfenbrenner (1979) explained that the various systems fit neatly inside each other "like a set of Russian dolls" (p. 3). The five systems, as constructed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), consist of the microsystem (immediate environment such as home, early learning centre, neighborhood); the mesosystem (the relationships existing between the various microsystems); the exosystem (a system that can affect the child yet has no direct relationship with the child, such as a parent's workplace); and the macrosystem (beliefs, values, culture). A fifth system, the chronosystem refers to change that occurs usually during life's transitions, such as entering a preschool program, beginning formal education, the death of a loved one (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory confirmed the uniqueness of each family and underpinned the need to study various influences on families in order to design and implement support systems to honour strengths and address needs. In addition, this theoretical framework informs this capstone project as it requires "looking beyond single settings to the relations between them" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3), thus potentially increasing the understanding of barriers and what may work to attract, retain and engage parents. The funds of knowledge framework, introduced below, will serve as a reminder to identify family strengths and to listen to learn.

Funds of Knowledge Framework

As mentioned in Chapter 1, understanding and utilizing Moll's funds of knowledge framework can result in building strong, reciprocal relationships with parents, lowering and removing barriers to engagement. This framework acknowledged the unique talents, strengths, and skills that all parents and children have, which can be invited into the classroom to support pedagogy, make learning relevant, and enhance relationships between school and home. The framework also demonstrated that increased understanding of families and purposeful use of the families' vast funds of knowledge enhanced educational experiences and resulted in increased positive outcomes for at-risk children (González et al., 2005). Moll et al. (1992) shared that when educators engaged in multiple in-home visits with families to listen and learn, they gained an understanding of the values, strengths, knowledge, skill sets and work history of their students' families.

Utilizing a funds of knowledge framework demonstrated several benefits. Firstly, teachers began to see children and families as resourceful and strength-filled (Moll, 2005; Moll & González, 1994). Secondly, strong connections were created with parents (Moll et al., 1992; González et al., 2005). Thirdly, reciprocity was reached between parents and teachers, and between students and teachers increasingly valuing parents and their children (González, 2005; González et al., 1995).

Moll (2005) stated that home visits "can alter parents' relationships with teachers, and by implication, the parents' positioning with the school as a social system" (p. 280), summing up the potential of the funds of knowledge framework to level parent/teacher relationships. Moll (2005) expressed that once relationships achieved reciprocity, new ways of engaging parents became apparent. Thus, Moll's funds of knowledge framework supports this capstone project as it

emphasizes the importance of engaging parents by recognizing and utilizing their funds of knowledge.

The education and parental involvement models introduced next are examples of respectful relationships between parents and teachers with the intent to maximize children's educational outcomes.

Education and Parental Involvement Models

The three education and parent involvement models selected for this capstone value respectful and reciprocal relationships with families and view parents as partners. This is important in terms of the questions guiding this project as the extant literature revealed the significance of relationship-building to attract, retain and engage parents in early childhood education and parenting programs (Axford et al., 2012; Garber et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2012)

Comer's Model for Reforming Education

In 1968, Comer accepted a challenge to positively influence the outcomes for children of predominately poor African American families attending an elementary school reputed to have poor attendance, poor academic outcomes, and tense relationships between children, educators and parents (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996). Comer et al. (1996) described the situation he encountered as highly stressed parents, low expectations from teachers, and mistrustful home-school relationships resulting in academic failure for children. The authors pointed out the vast cultural differences between home and school, with children caught between conflicting values (Comer et al., 1996).

Focused on building trusting relationships between children, teachers and parents, along with providing a welcoming atmosphere, Comer enticed parents to become involved in the school, contributing to the education of their children. Within three years, parent turnout to one event

increased from 15 to 400 (Comer, 2005). The philosophy confirmed “student academic performance, behavior, and preparation for school and life can be greatly improved when the adult stakeholders work together in respectful, collaborative ways to create a school climate or culture that supports development, good instruction, and academic learning” (Comer, 2005, p. 40).

Strategies to move parents from missing to engaged included: intentionally providing opportunities to encourage teacher/parent interactions; making transportation, child care and food accessible; involving parents in the planning of school events; inviting parents to participate on a parent team; providing a variety of opportunities for parent involvement, from homework monitoring to participating on a school management committee; implementing increased focus on student achievement, student engagement and teacher development; and instituting and implementing guiding principles to build a caring and inclusive learning environment (Comer et al., 1996).

In a reflection on his life’s work, Comer (2009) revealed that change occurred slowly but noted change did occur. He also noted that academic achievement increased significantly, moving the school from one of the bottom to one of the top academically. Comer pointed out that children and parents increasingly felt they belonged, positive relationships were established between home and school, and children experienced positive post-secondary outcomes. Lastly, Comer shared that some parents began to pursue higher education and employment goals, an unintended but welcomed result of being part of Comer’s model. Comer’s model is important in addressing the guiding questions of this project because of its emphasis on relationship building, a critical element discussed in the extant literature to attract, retain and engage parents in early childhood education and parenting programs (Axford et al., 2012; Garber et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2012)

A second and well recognized parent engagement model, Epstein’s model for family involvement is described next.

Epstein's Model of Six Types of Family Involvement

Epstein (2011) emphasized the value of partnerships between schools, families and communities, naming each a sphere of influence for children. Epstein (2011) urged educators to value the interconnectedness of each sphere and its contribution to the development of a child. Epstein (2011) recognized that children naturally move in and out of each sphere of influence, and the closer each sphere works together, the better school outcomes children are likely to achieve.

To flesh out how families, schools and communities can work together toward optimal outcomes for children, Epstein (2011) introduced six ways schools can involve and support family involvement, namely supporting and teaching positive parenting practices; communicating openly with families and inviting their input; offering parents volunteer opportunities; teaching parents supportive home learning practices; extending decision making opportunities at school to parents; and, inviting the community to build relationships with schools and families.

Pointing out how harmonious relationships between families, schools and communities benefit children and lay the foundation for positive academic outcomes, Epstein (2010) further suggested five steps schools can take, ensuring these three spheres of influence work together. Epstein (2010) shared that relationships between families and schools are not always smooth sailing, however, addressing the challenges and building communication and resolution processes can serve to strengthen relationships. Similar to the importance of Comer's model to address this capstone project's guiding questions, Epstein's model provides guidance for relationship-building between educators and parents. Parent/educator relationships are emphasized in the extant literature as crucial to attracting, retaining and engaging parents in early childhood education and parenting programs (Axford et al., 2012; Garber et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2012).The next parent

involvement model, an integrative approach with multi-risk families, addresses the barriers families face to participation and engagement in services (Landy & Menna, 2006).

Landy and Menna's Integrative Approach with Multi-Risk Families

Landy and Menna (2006) challenged service providers to “shift from perceiving families as being hard to reach, to thinking about what makes the *service* that is being offered hard to accept for a particular family” (p. 180). Their challenge placed the onus on service providers to scrutinize their services for goodness of fit for families and invited providers to adjust services to suit the strengths and needs of families seeking/requiring intervention.

Noting the high rates of refusal to participate, accompanied by the high drop-out rates, Landy and Menna (2006) suggested a tailored, integrative approach to early intervention services with families deemed to have multi-risks. The integrated approach included an evaluation of the family's readiness to be involved; an assessment of the family's strengths and risk factors; a review of the theoretical approaches to inform the work with the family; a scan of the accessible services available to the family; the creation and monitoring of an intervention plan; and, a plan to stabilize and maintain progress (Landy & Menna, 2006).

Landy and Menna (2006) shared a comprehensive list of reasons families are reluctant to engage in services or drop out once services have been initiated. The authors divided the reasons into two categories, *pragmatic* and *attitudinal* (p. 181). The pragmatic reasons noted were difficulties making contact with families to initiate services due to lack of telephone, language differences, or change in contact information; challenges to build awareness of the programs especially when reliant on print materials, as some parents may be illiterate or have language competency differences; lack of transportation; and, time constraints/conflicts of both family and service providers. Attitudinally, parents' reluctance to engage in services centered on concern for

their privacy; desire to resolve their own issues; fear of being intruded upon or misunderstood; fear of discovery of abuse or illegal activities within the home; fear of potential consequences from disclosing health or mental health issues; mistrust of service providers; inability to commit to a schedule of activities and services; fear of being criticized or rejected by service providers; feeling hopeless that circumstances can change; not ready to initiate involvement; and, feeling that services being offered do not meet their needs. The cited reasons for reluctance or refusal to participate were supported in the literature reviewed for this capstone paper and will be discussed further on in this chapter. Landy and Menna's integrative approach is important in addressing the guiding questions of this project as it also invites service providers to examine practices and build interventions to support the attraction, retention and engagement of parents in early family intervention programs.

These three approaches to family involvement emphasized that a) parent engagement needs to be valued and supported by the intentional action of service providers; b) change can be slow and steady for families and service providers; c) a one-size-fits-all approach does not work as families are unique and may require tailored strategies; d) invitations for parents to contribute their talents and skills enriches and levels relationships between parents and service providers; and e) engaging with families deemed at risk can be both rewarding and challenging.

Presented next is an early learning and child care curriculum framework. Curriculum and pedagogical frameworks in early childhood education guide educators in their work with young children and their families.

Curriculum and Pedagogical Framework

In this section, I examine our province's early learning framework and supporting documents. The NB Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English (2008) was created for home-based and centre-based early learning and child care as well as community-based programs working with parents and children. The framework and supporting documents demonstrate value for reciprocal relationships between children, parents, and early childhood educators.

The value for parental involvement is evident throughout the curriculum framework and in supporting documents. The statement, "educators at child care centres have a responsibility to cultivate strong reciprocal relationships with families" (Early Childhood Centre, UNB, 2008, p. 11) is one of many statements that places the responsibility on educators to invite parents to co-construct curriculum and have influence on their child's away-from-home environment. Educators are asked to become familiar with and to demonstrate value for family strengths (Elliot, Ashton, Hunt & Nason, 2011). The recognition of parents as their child's first teacher is emphasized (Early Childhood Centre, UNB, 2008). One support document, *Our Youngest Children: Learning and Caring with Infants and Toddlers*, stressed valuing families and getting to know their strengths (Elliot et al., 2011). In the *Communications and Literacies* support document, Rose and Whitty (2010) discussed listening to families, getting to know their unique home learning environments, and the authors provided examples of how to include families' first languages in early learning and child care environments. *Play and Playfulness*, a third support document, included a story of how a father influenced play with a hunting theme, sparking dramatic play with children and inviting many parents and community members to share their knowledge and talents (Ashton, Stewart, Hunt, Nason, & Scheffel, 2009). *Diversity and Social Responsibility*, a fourth support document,

adopted a rights-based approach to the involvement of families, stressed the importance of democratic practices, and shared examples of ways to include all families (Ashton, Hunt, Nason, & Whitty, 2010). Lastly, the support document *Well-Being* invited educators to build welcoming and inclusive environments for all families, adopting practices to reflect each child's family in the early learning and child care environment (Ashton, Hunt, & White, 2008). The NB Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English (2008), recognizing that relationships between educators and parents are sometimes contentious, offered practical advice for educators including searching for common ground, communicating without bias, and demonstrating value for each other.

Review of the Literature

As introduced in Chapter 1, the review of extant literature is divided into identified barriers and promising practices to attract, retain and engage parents in early childhood and parenting education opportunities.

Identified Barriers to Parental Engagement

Through an extensive review of research studies, a multitude of barriers were identified that potentially contributed to parents' reluctance to become involved in services or to the high dropout rate once services had been initiated.

In their study examining parent participation in Sure Start programs, Avis et al. (2007) identified lack of transportation as a major barrier to parent participation. Simply put, parents did not have means to get to the programs and thus, did not attend. Lack of transportation was identified multiple times as a practical reason parents were "missing" (Coe et al., 2008; Mendez et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2012).

Another practical and often cited reason for non-attendance was lack of child care (Haggerty et al., 2002; Lueder, 2011). In a study of two Head Start programs in New York, Lamb-Parker et al. (2001) shared that parents typically had younger children at home and could not find reliable child care. Using an appreciative inquiry approach with young parents in a similar early intervention program, Taylor et al. (2012) discovered that offering child care was one of the many practices cited as supporting parental engagement. Interestingly, not just any child care arrangement would suffice. Mendez et al. (2009) identified that the quality of child care staff and the timing of the child care provision could be potential attractors or barriers.

In addition to transportation and child care, scheduling conflicts was noted by Mendez et al. (2009) as a leading barrier to parental participation. This finding was supported by Underwood & Killoran (2012), recommending service providers plan programs on week nights and weekends to better suit parents' schedules.

Moreover, frequently mentioned in the literature as a barrier was competing demands on parents' time (Barnes, MacPherson, & Senior, 2006; Coe et al., 2008). Barlow et al. (2005) described some parents as "too burdened to be able to think about the possible benefits" (p. 203) of involvement.

Lack of trust was repeatedly mentioned as a barrier (Barlow et al., 2005; Underwood & Killoran, 2012). Parents described themselves as feeling "under surveillance" by service providers (Winkworth, McArthur, Layton, Thomson & Wilson, 2010, p. 442); mistrusting other parents (Avis et al., 2007); and preferring to seek advice or assistance from a friend or family member (Barlow et al., 2005).

Additional barriers mentioned less frequently in the literature but important to consider included low literacy skills of parents (Barlow et al., 2005; Garbers, Tunstill, Allnock, & Akhurst,

2006); parents not perceiving a need to be involved (Barnes et al., 2006; Mendez et al., 2009); parents feeling judged and/or devalued by service providers (Taylor et al., 2012; Winkworth et al., 2010); lack of culturally competent practices (Underwood & Killoran, 2012); lack of confidence (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999); shame and stigmatization (Taylor et al., 2012; Winkworth et al., 2010); not knowing about the program (Coe et al., 2008; Winkworth et al., 2010); and past negative experiences with similar services (Garbers et al., 2006).

Lamb-Parker et al. (2001) commented on the complexities and challenges some parents face, placing an invitation to early childhood and parenting programs low on their list of priorities. The energy required to meet basic needs, such as providing food, shelter and heat for their families can be all-consuming.

The next section highlights strategies found in the literature to attract, retain, and engage parents in programs and services.

Promising Practices to Increase Parental Engagement

Recognizing that “no one tactic worked sufficiently well on its own” (Garbers et al., 2006, p. 291), the following six categories reveal promising practices found in the literature to attract, retain and engage parents.

First, the literature was clear on providing the practical support parents need to attend programs and services. Transportation, child care, and food were most frequently mentioned (Larocque et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2012). In addition, Jack et al. (2002) suggested offering clothing, support to attend meetings, appointments and parenting programs, as well as translation services.

Second, the provision of emotional support was stressed. Relationship and trust building was underscored as critical to recruitment, retention and engagement of parents in parenting

programs and services (Axford et al., 2012; Warren et al., 2009). Evangelou, Coxon, Smith, and Chan (2013) stated “for some parents, actually taking the first step into the room can represent an enormous hurdle, one which may take several weeks or even months to overcome” (p. 133).

Suggestions were made to intentionally support parents to enter a program by pairing them with parents already attending or by recruiting parent ambassadors to promote the program (Garbers et al., 2006; McDonald, FitzRoy, Fuchs, Fooker & Klasen, 2012; Warren et al., 2009).

Third, the literature encouraged innovation. A plethora of innovative strategies was suggested including increasing accessibility by creating neighborhood parenting hubs (Taylor et al., 2012; Underwood & Killoran, 2012); providing incentives and gifts to attend programs (Jack et al., 2002; McDonald et al., 2012); offering flexible scheduling (Henrich & Gadaire, 2008; Larocque et al., 2011) and multi-age programs enabling families to participate as a whole (Underwood & Killoran, 2012); providing programs that parents can access in their own home (Larocque et al., 2011); creating unique and fun events to attract parents in a non-threatening manner (Garbers et al., 2006); allowing parents to try out a program (Axford et al., 2012; McDonald et al., 2012); advertising programs using various modes, including print and video (Axford et al., 2012; Barlow et al., 2005; Garbers et al., 2006); individualizing services to suit parents’ and family’s strengths and needs (Snell-Johns, Mendez & Smith, 2004); personalizing invitations using phone and text options (Avis et al., 2007); and, providing options for parents to catch up on missed sessions (Axford et al., 2012).

Fourth, the literature was clear on the need to involve parents. To begin with, McDonald et al. (2012) suggested including parents in decisions regarding program delivery; consulting parents to understand what they need (Barlow et al., 2005); and asking parents frequently for feedback on all aspects of the programs (Warren et al., 2009). Understanding why parents volunteer to engage

with services can inform successful attracting, retaining and engaging practices (McCurdy & Daro, 2001).

Fifth, reflective practices were recommended. Underwood and Killoran (2012) emphasized that parents are keenly aware of and sensitive to staff members' ability to connect with parents and demonstrate their caring and trustworthiness. Snell-Johns et al. (2004) shared the strategy of monitoring staff to ensure their expectations of, and behavior with, parents aligns with the program values.

Last, persistence pays off. Barlow et al. (2005) shared that service providers need to repeatedly offer their assistance in the hope that services will be accessed when needed by parents. Barnes et al. (2006) advised practicing persistence. Garbers et al. (2006) confirmed that attracting, retaining, and engaging parents requires an ongoing effort.

The information gained in this literature review underpins connections to practice, the subject of the next chapter, Chapter 3.

CHAPTER THREE: CONNECTIONS TO PRACTICE

In this chapter, I present three vignettes based on situations I have experienced or I am currently experiencing in my work. These vignettes represent elements of parent engagement found in the literature. Once presented, I establish connections between the theory, research and practice. I also introduce a presentation intended for a network of early childhood service providers in our school district.

I begin by sharing a vignette drawn from an experience which occurred more than ten years ago. This type of experience has influenced my thinking on parent engagement and is one that connects to the theoretical frameworks, models, curriculum framework and literature introduced in this capstone project.

(Note: All names used are fictitious to protect privacy.)

Vignette #1: Jenny

I witnessed a transformation in one mother, a transformation so profound that the experience stays with me today. I will begin at the beginning. Early in September, Jenny timidly walked into the program, anxiously clutching the hands of her two young children. This was the family's first day in an early intervention program. With her head hanging low and absolutely no eye contact, Jenny whispered the purpose of their visit. Her voice was so low, she was barely heard. I happened to notice their entrance and I especially took note of Jenny's seemingly incredibly low self-esteem. I continued to notice her after that day. Jenny quietly and inconspicuously took part in all the program had to offer. She wanted the best for her children, even though her involvement appeared to be painful for her. One day, about a year later, Jenny was invited by a parent to join a group of parents to organize a party for their children. At first, she seemed astonished that she was being asked. Her demeanour seemed to say, "Who ... me?"

What can I possibly contribute?” When she consented, became part of the organizing committee and contributed her artistic talents, her head lifted, a smile emerged and she demonstrated this newfound confidence until she and her family were discharged. Jenny’s image of increased self-worth is one I will always remember and treasure.

When I reflect back on this experience, I recognize the parents’ invitation to this mother as the catalyst to her newfound confidence. This mother’s talents went unnoticed and untapped for a year. Once unleashed, her artistic abilities were sought out over and over again, inviting her to be both a contributor to, and a receiver of the agency’s work. González et al. (1995) advised approaching families with the intent to discover their strengths rather than exclusively looking for deficits. This mother had the practical support to participate in the early intervention program; however, practical support was not enough to realize her full engagement. Looking back with what I now know, I would have advocated for a greater focus on utilizing a strength-based approach, finding the families’ funds of knowledge. Then, I would have worked to find opportunities to express these abilities in the best interest of the family and others, achieving the relationship reciprocity promoted in The NB Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English (2008). Secondly, in looking back with what I now know, I wonder if the ‘buddy’ program mentioned by Avis et al. (2007), Garbers et al. (2006), McDonald et al. (2012), and Warren et al. (2009) would have eased Jenny’s entry into the program. I realize that the profound difference I witnessed in Jenny’s confidence level is what I wish for all parents who conjure up the courage to participate in early childhood education programs.

In the next vignette, I describe a family of seven, struggling to survive on a meager income, and how their growth in trust for service providers helped them to find what they needed for themselves and their family. This vignette is also an example of the reciprocity that can occur

when trusting and positive relationships develop between parents and service providers, reflected in the teachings of Comer (2005) and Epstein (2011).

Vignette #2: Steve and Sarah

Steve and Sarah and their five young children lived in a low-income housing community, worrying about their safety. This family existed on Sarah's meager income. With reservation and scepticism, they agreed to participate in the early intervention program for their youngest son, concerned that he was slow to speak and overly withdrawn. Steve and Sarah entered the agency in a reserved manner, seemingly displaying a lack of trust for how the agency might impact their family. They slowly warmed up as evidenced by their display of a playful and wry sense of humor. They began to offer their assistance in aid programs, programs they were also recipients of. They fully met their commitments, at first out of obligation and then, with pride and enthusiasm. What I noticed was the relationships they slowly built, the trust that ensued, and the guard they slowly let down. As trust grew, they joined a food purchasing club and a meal-sharing program and accepted support to move to a safer neighborhood. Steve began volunteering at one of the children's schools. He also began participating in a mentorship relationship focused on finding employment. Sarah's job, while providing sustenance to the family, was unpredictable as Sarah's hours fluctuated, affecting her net pay. I always got the sense that life wasn't easy for this family but they often seemed content.

I bring attention to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model as I reflect on this family's various environments, nestled snugly inside each other, noting some boundaries and overlaps, making up their unique ecosystem that I describe next. Entering this early family intervention program introduced Steve and Sarah to many new microsystems, including their youngest son's new classroom, parenting groups, programs and clubs. I think of the

interconnectedness between their microsystems, supporting Steve and Sarah to provide for and support their family, and also to help them realize reciprocity. I reflect on the impact of Sarah's work and fluctuating paycheck, explained by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as a component of the exosystem for this family, and how destabilizing this was for them. I also applaud Steve and Sarah's resourcefulness, burgeoning trust, and willingness to do what was necessary to make life better for their family.

Steve and Sarah's influences of low educational achievement, their financial struggles, their neighborhood and some of their parenting practices resonate with Landy and Menna's (2006) findings on families deemed at risk. However, Steve and Sarah's acceptance of an integrative approach including home visiting, parenting groups, various approaches to meet basic needs, a new neighborhood, volunteerism, and a mentorship arrangement have greatly strengthened this family and at the same time, provided protective factors to offset risks.

Unlike the first vignette about Jenny, I cannot pinpoint a certain event that had a profound influence on Steve and Sarah. In this case, establishing trust, recognized in the literature as a crucial element to building relationships with families (Jack et al., 2002; Underwood & Killoran, 2012), may have been the critical element. In addition to trust, approaches advocated by Comer (1996), including offering a welcoming and caring environment, a variety of opportunities to build relationships between educators and parents, and invitations to collaborate, were employed by this agency. Open communication, opportunities for volunteerism, and building positive parenting skills, practices emphasized by Epstein (2011) as essential for parental engagement were utilized with Steve and Sarah as well.

In the end, I applaud Steve and Sarah for their courage to abandon their apprehension and embrace new ideas and experiences in the best interests of their entire family.

In the third and last vignette, and resonating with Epstein's (2011) model on parent engagement, I present a current challenge to attract and retain parents to a newly created early childhood space. This challenge calls us to dig deeper in order to reflect on potential barriers to parental engagement and to generate ideas to attract, retain, and engage "missing" parents.

Vignette #3: Build It and They Will Come....?

In an effort to make programs more accessible and to build a neighborhood hub for parents as described by Taylor et al. (2012) and Underwood and Killoran (2012), our team worked collaboratively to create an early childhood space in an elementary school. The school offered an amazingly large and bright double classroom. We were openly welcomed by school personnel to pursue this promising project. This early learning space within a school is the first of its kind in our school district and we are hoping this is one of many. The space offers joint programs for parents and their children, from birth to kindergarten entry, who live in the school's catchment area. I have often heard, 'if we build it, they will come,' but that is not happening in this early learning space. An open house for parents received a mediocre response despite a mailed invite to all potential families. Five months have passed and the programs offered are receiving a low response.

The lacklustre response from parents is not surprising to me, though surprising to the educators involved in the project. The lacklustre response from parents, nevertheless, is a challenge for our team. We have an opportunity to reflect, examine and bring change to our current practices to attract, retain and engage parents. Traditionally, our team sends out e-mail invites, publishes a calendar received by a select group, and works in partnership with other service providers to attract parents to group activities. Programs generally fill up utilizing these practices but we are certain that the parents we most wish to attract are not in attendance. Attracting the "missing" parents to

this new early childhood classroom requires a more comprehensive and thoughtful approach. In offering an analysis and critique of this situation, I reflect on Landy and Menna's (2006) question, "what makes the *service* that is being offered hard to accept for a particular family" (p. 180) as it challenges thinking about what certain families might need to place them in a position to attend such programs.

First, parents have their own funds of knowledge to contribute as a resource to the program. Getting to know what these are and inviting parents to share their funds of knowledge leads to strong, trusting and reciprocal relationships with parents (González et al., 2005). Employing parents' funds of knowledge can break down the barriers of parents feeling judged and devalued by service providers (Taylor et al., 2012; Winkworth et al., 2010) and perhaps would remove the shame and stigmatization (Taylor et al., 2012; Winkworth et al., 2010) felt by some parents who are reluctant to attend such programs. Contributing skills, talents and artifacts from home also builds parental connections to the program and contributes to a warm and welcoming space (Ashton et al., 2008).

Second, I wonder if the parents know about this early learning opportunity. A barrier mentioned in the literature was that parents did not know about the programs (Coe et al., 2008; Winkworth et al., 2010). A flyer was mailed to all homes but this may have landed in households where English is not well understood or literacy is too low to comprehend the invitation. This barrier resonates with what Barlow et al. (2005) identified in regards to attracting parents who are illiterate and the necessity of discovering new ways of providing invitations to counter this barrier. In reflecting about these possibilities/scenarios, I believe that additional and creative modes of 'getting the word out' needs to be explored and employed.

Third, if the program is known, I am wondering about trust, as trust has been identified as a significant barrier in the literature reviewed (Barlow et al., 2005; Underwood & Killoran, 2012). Comer (1996) identified home visits with parents and networking with reputable community agencies as trust-builders. Additional strategies and ideas that connect with the literature reviewed include the following: recruiting attending parents to promote the program with “missing” parents (Garbers et al., 2006); offering incentives to attend (Jack et al., 2002); creating non-threatening family fun events (Garbers et al., 2006); and consulting with the parents currently in attendance regarding their needs and obtaining their feedback as a start to attracting and building the trust necessary to retain and engage parents (Barlow et al., 2005; Warren et al., 2009).

Fourth, Epstein (2011) advocated action teams to build partnerships between schools, families and communities. To adopt and adapt Epstein’s (2011) approach, the action teams for the early childhood space could include parents, program personnel and community members, planning and evaluating practices to recruit, retain and engage families and to provide input on programs offered. Yearly or multi-year action plans could be collaboratively created and collaboratively carried out. Advocated by Ashton et al. (2010), parents participating on this action team would have an equal voice in decision making for the program.

Last, attracting, retaining and engaging parents requires continuous effort and reflection. I resonate with Barlow et al.’s (2005), Barnes et al.’s (2006) and Garbers et al.’s (2006) recommendations on the necessity of persistence. A parent who may feel too burdened today may have their burdens lifted and want to explore a program; trusted friends may persuade their attendance; ‘word of mouth’ by satisfied parents may spark new attendees; and parents may begin to prioritize program attendance amongst their many commitments. I also see Landy and Menna’s

(2006) posits here regarding a family's readiness to be involved and tailoring both approaches and interventions to fit a family's unique strengths and needs.

In the next section, I introduce a four-part, full day seminar designed for a network of early childhood providers in our school district to support and encourage their efforts to attract, retain, and engage parents in their respective programs and services.

Seminar for Early Childhood Service Providers

“Missing” Parents... What Are *We* Missing?

Engaging Parents in Early Childhood Education Programs

A PowerPoint presentation, intended for a network of early childhood services providers, has been created (Appendix A). Participants will be introduced to the inspiration behind this capstone project and the research undertaken. The seminar is meant to inform participants, invite discussion, invoke reflection and inspire change. The day-long seminar is divided into four parts.

In Part 1, I introduce the theoretical frameworks (Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of development and Moll's funds of knowledge). Moreover, I share three parent involvement models (Comer's model for reforming education; Epstein's model of six types of family involvement; and, Landy and Menna's integrative approach with multi-risk families). Next, I review the NB Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English and supporting documents, calling attention to the sections related to parent involvement.

In Part 2, I introduce the comprehensive literature review undertaken for this capstone project. I present barriers and promising practices discovered in the literature. I invite participants to engage in discussions to identify any barriers and promising practices they may have encountered in their work but have not been identified in the literature review.

In Part 3, I connect research and practice. I share three vignettes with participants, all of which are situations that I have encountered or am encountering in my work with families. I provide an analysis and critique of each vignette. At the end of each vignette, I call upon participants to contribute their funds of knowledge to each scenario.

In Part 4, I invite participants to engage in a discussion on the following question: *In what way has this presentation inspired you -- or not -- to change or add a practice to attract “missing” parents to your programs/services? If so, what would that be?* This discussion will occur in pairs and then shared out to the larger group.

To conclude the presentation, I contribute some final thoughts on Moll’s funds of knowledge and Landy and Menna’s (2006) question on “what makes the *service* that is being offered hard to accept for a particular family” (p. 180). I also draw attention to the courage it takes for parents to enter in a new situation or to permit a stranger into their home – possibly an experience the seminar participants have not had. Finally, I thank participants for their attendance at the seminar and their continued work with families and young children in our school district.

In the final chapter, Chapter Four, I offer reflections and concluding thoughts, limitations of this capstone project and recommendations for future study and practice.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

In this capstone project I reviewed the extant literature on parental involvement in early childhood education and parenting programs. In particular, I examined barriers to parental participation and I explored promising practices to attract, retain and engage parents. The literature revealed the complexities associated with attracting, retaining and engaging “missing” parents in early childhood education and parenting programs. I have discovered, through a comprehensive literature review, that a multitude of barriers exist and that attracting, retaining, and engaging parents will not work with a one-size-fits-all approach. Every family is unique. Whereas some parents may be very open and able to attend programs, others may be reluctant and in need of an individualized approach. Still other parents need providers to be patient and persistent and perhaps, one day, they may no longer be “missing” the opportunities offered to them. However, parents do have the right to self-determination and may decide not to accept any invitations for early childhood education and parenting programs.

As a result of engaging in this capstone project, I have increased my understanding of what may be preventing parents from attending programs and what may be interfering with their retention and engagement once attendance has begun. I feel better informed to engage in discussions and I am eager to share findings which may support service providers in their quest to attract “missing” families.

Next, I share reflections, concluding thoughts and limitations related to the scope of this capstone project and make suggestions for future study and practice.

Reflections and Concluding Thoughts

In response to guiding question one, this capstone highlights several promising practices to attract, retain, and engage “missing” parents in early learning opportunities for themselves and their young children. Firstly, getting familiar with a family’s ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) builds an understanding of what supports and challenges families have and what influences their functioning. As well, listening to learn about a family’s strengths and their funds of knowledge can be a starting place for a reciprocal and respectful relationship, identified as being critical to engaging “missing” families (Moll et al., 1992). As well, Landy and Menna’s (2006) question of what makes it difficult for families to accept our invitations challenges service providers to ponder the possibilities and create individualized approaches to meet families where they are. Partnering with parents is frequently mentioned and espoused as a value in early years programs. In order to establish true partnerships, we need to see parents as experts and utilize their expertise to balance the relationship, honour their strengths, and open ourselves up to being a learner, not solely a teacher.

In response to guiding question two, the literature reviewed on parental engagement increased my understanding of the barriers and how complex parent engagement can be. Once again, the barriers are as unique as each family, with some commonalities. In reflecting on the types of barriers, I believe the practical barriers are the easiest but not easy to address as they can be apparent. Providing transportation and child care; making schedule adjustments; advertising using a variety of modes; increasing accessibility by building neighborhood hubs; and finding program ambassadors are feasible. What may be perplexing is understanding and addressing the attitudinal or emotional barriers, such as past negative experiences; fear of exposing family secrets; concealing criminal behavior; feeling intruded upon or scrutinized; lack of confidence; lack of trust; and the

potential stigma accompanying the program or service offered. What stays with me is the courage it takes to enter an unfamiliar situation. Parents do enter these situations over and over again in the best interest of their child's well-being. I experienced this courage in the case of Jenny and Steve and Sarah and many other parents with whom I have had the opportunity to work with over the years. I have observed the difference it makes when parents are invited to participate in parent advisory committees, planning meetings, and volunteer opportunities. Not only have I seen this involvement build greater trust, I have noticed the increase in self-confidence that results from engaging in these opportunities. With this heightened confidence level, parents have summoned up the courage to further their education, become employed, or find work that suits them better, and venture out in other ways that positively impact their own and their family's future. Comer (2009), who witnessed these same changes through his extensive work with families, summarized it by sharing "many parents have been motivated to improve their own education, employment, and lives through their involvement in our improvement process" (p. 122).

An additional reflection is the amount of time and attention attracting "missing" parents can take. Typically, programs and services are not staffed generously. If we are to realize success in attracting, retaining and engaging "missing" parents, we need to invest time for creative and effective outreach, relationship building, unique and tailored approaches, and inclusive practices.

The models and curriculum framework presented in this capstone share a commitment to partner with parents, discover and employ their strengths, level the relationship between parents and service providers, and invite parents to contribute at a higher level in the best interest of all involved.

I have shared my passion for providing quality early learning opportunities for parents and their young children, especially families who live in poverty and lack these opportunities. I also

shared my desire for all children to enter kindergarten with confidence, ready and eager to share their knowledge and to learn from their peers and teachers. I am hopeful that this capstone project will be a catalyst for discussion, reflective thinking, and new practices resulting in more “missing” parents being attracted to, retained in, and engaged in programs, thereby opening up opportunities for themselves and for their children. I am also hopeful that parents will be increasingly invited to participate at a higher level in early childhood education and parenting programs, offering their funds of knowledge and contributing to decision making and policy development.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Study and Practice

In this capstone project I introduced examples of barriers and promising practices to attract, retain and engage parents in early childhood education and parenting programs. The barriers and promising practices I identified through the review of the extant literature are mainly attributed to findings with parents participating or “missing” from early childhood education and parenting programs for parents of young children. These findings may not relate to parents participating in or “missing” from other educational or parenting programs who have school-aged children.

Additionally, except for the Government of NB early learning and child care curriculum framework, the literature reviewed does not focus on our local experience in New Brunswick, Canada, and does not involve parents from our province. Thus, the findings of both barriers and promising practices may not relate fully to local circumstances. However, my lengthy experience in early childhood and family serving programs contributes to my confidence that congruence exists with the findings. I tend to think there are more commonalities than differences in the local/global scene.

In light of these identified limitations, I recommend that further studies utilize a funds of knowledge approach with a small group of local families. In terms of recommendations for

practice, I suggest that the conversation is brought to our school district, including organizing focus groups with parents to learn what attracts or repels their involvement in early childhood education and parenting programs. Lastly, to prioritize attracting, retaining and engaging “missing” parents with service providers, I recommend ongoing discussion and review of practices by early childhood services network members, highlighting successes and challenges.

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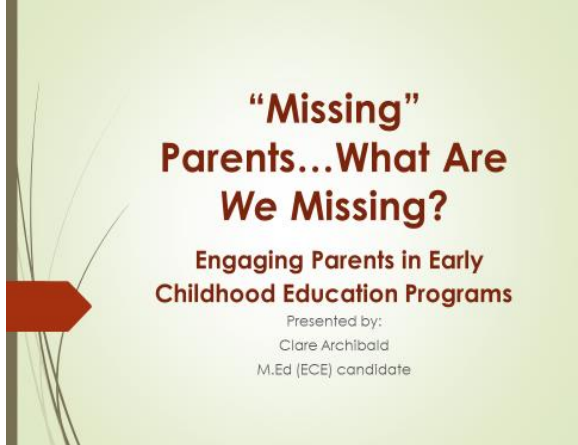

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APPENDIX A

Presentation

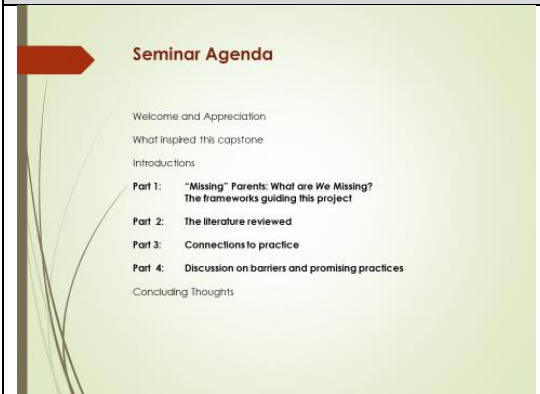
 <p>“Missing” Parents... What Are We Missing?</p> <p>Engaging Parents in Early Childhood Education Programs</p> <p>Presented by: Clare Archibald M.Ed (ECE) candidate</p>	<p>This presentation is intended for a network of early childhood services providers.</p> <p><u>Speaking Notes</u></p> <p>“Welcome to my presentation, “Missing” Parents... What Are We Missing? Engaging Parents in Early Childhood Education Programs. This presentation is part of my M.Ed. ECE Studies with UBC. I will introduce you to what the literature revealed about attracting, retaining and engaging parents in early years’ programs. From past discussions, I know that this is a topic of interest to you. I appreciate your presence here today. My hope is that you leave here feeling motivated to dig deeper to attract, retain and engage the “missing” parents we so wish to see in the programs and services provided in early childhood services.”</p>
 <p>What inspired this capstone project?</p>	<p><u>Speaking Notes</u></p> <p>“When I began my Master of Education degree with UBC, I intended to study the best experiences to provide children who lack opportunities prior to kindergarten entry. My desire was to support a confident and smooth start to kindergarten for <i>all</i> children. I often hear of children who struggle in their first days, first weeks, or even first months in kindergarten. My goal is for all children to enter kindergarten with confidence, with “a zest for living and learning” (Early Childhood Centre, UNB, 2008, p. 1).</p> <p>The children who are struggling to adjust to kindergarten are often identified as having had no early learning opportunities prior to kindergarten entry. We know that many opportunities exist in our school district, but we do have families who are not engaged with these opportunities. And thus, I came to realize that the best options for children would not matter if we were unable to attract, retain, and engage their parents. With this revelation, I changed the focus of this capstone project and it has become a study of why parents may be “missing” and what the literature tells us may work in attracting, retaining and engaging parents.”</p>



Pair/Share Activity

Participants will be invited to pair up and introduce each other. Each pair will be asked to discuss one way they welcome new parents to their programs.

Then, each pair will be invited to introduce one another to the larger group and share the welcoming practices they discussed.



Speaking Notes

“This seminar has four parts:

- Part 1: Theoretical Frameworks, Models, Curriculum Framework and Guiding Questions
- Part 2: The Literature Review
- Part 3: Connections to Practice
- Part 4: Discussion: Barriers and Promising Practices

At the very end, I will share some concluding thoughts.”

“It is not the ability to learn that these children lack, but the knowledge, experiences, language and opportunities for learning.”

Susan B Neuman
Changing The Odds for Children
At Risk, 2009, p. xi

Speaking Notes

“I share this quote to emphasize the importance of our work in supporting young children and their parents and providing opportunities to become the best that they can be. In order to provide these experiences and opportunities successfully, we need to hold all families in high esteem, recognize their self-determination, value parents as our partners and be committed to examining our practices to ensure they are the best they can be for the children and families we serve.”

Capstone's Guiding Questions

1. In what ways can service providers attract, retain, and engage parents who are currently “missing” from early learning opportunities for themselves and their children?
2. In what ways does the literature on barriers to parental engagement increase understanding and lead to the increased engagement of “missing” parents and children?

Speaking Notes

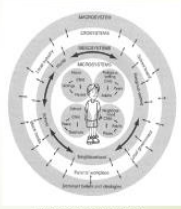
“This capstone endeavours to answer the following two guiding questions:

1. What does the extant literature reveal about ways service providers can attract, retain, and engage parents who are currently “missing” from early learning opportunities for themselves and their children? and
2. In what ways does the literature on barriers to parental engagement facilitate an understanding and potentially lead to the increased engagement of “missing” parents and children?

The rest of my presentation is a response to these two questions.”

Part 1 The Theoretical Frameworks

Bronfenbrenner's
ecological
systems theory of
development



[Hörkönen, 2007, p. 15].

Speaking Notes

“Throughout my coursework, a few theoretical frameworks were introduced and resonated with me and the work we do in early childhood. When asked to choose theoretical frameworks relevant to my capstone project, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory of development was top of mind.

As practitioners with families, we share a certain understanding that environments, and relationships within and between environments, have an effect on children’s growth and development. This framework demonstrates the many ecological systems of children, and their influences, both positively and negatively. Bronfenbrenner (1979) examined the relationships within and between the various ecological systems that children experience. As practitioners, we understand the influence of parent/child relationships; relationships children experience with peers and other adults, such as educators; relationships between parents and educators; how a parents’ workplace can effect family functioning; a neighborhood’s influence on a family; the influence of values, culture & religion; government policies governing families such as the newly enhanced child tax credit; and, the larger community.

Bronfenbrenner draws our attention to these critical relationships/ecologies of children and the interaction both within and between the ecologies and their influence on children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

To visualize the ecological systems of a family, Bronfenbrenner (1979) explained that the various systems fit neatly inside each other “like a set of Russian dolls” (p. 3).

The five systems, as constructed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), consist of the **microsystem** (immediate environment such as home, early learning centre, neighborhood); the **mesosystem** (the relationships existing between the various microsystems); the **exosystem** (a system that can affect the child yet has no direct relationship with the child, such as a parent’s workplace); and the **macrosystem** (beliefs, values, culture). A fifth system, the **chronosystem** refers to change that occurs usually during life’s transitions, such as entering a preschool program, beginning formal education, the death of a loved one (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory confirmed the uniqueness of each family and underpinned the need to study various influences on families in order to understand families and to design and implement support systems to honour strengths and address needs. In addition, this theoretical framework informs this capstone project as it requires “looking beyond single settings to the relations between them” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3), thus potentially increasing the understanding of barriers and what may work to attract, retain and engage parents.”

Theoretical Frameworks (continued)

Moll's funds of knowledge framework



Video found at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aW50Y8pGkE>

Speaking Notes

“This model, Moll’s funds of knowledge framework, fascinated me from the moment I was introduced to it. The framework challenged my thinking on parent engagement and led me back to times when I witnessed this framework in action and the impact it had on parents.

First, we will watch Luis Moll as he explains the funds of knowledge framework and then I will discuss what I found fascinating about this framework.”

“This framework acknowledges the unique talents, strengths, and skills that all parents and children have, which can be invited into the classroom to support pedagogy, make learning relevant, and enhance relationships between school and home.

The framework also demonstrates that increased understanding of families and purposeful use of the families’ vast funds of knowledge enhances educational experiences and results in increased positive outcomes for children deemed at-risk (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Moll et al. (1992) shared that when educators engage in multiple in-home visits with families to listen and learn, they gain an understanding of the values, strengths, knowledge, skill sets and work history of their students’ families. We may have all heard the statement, “you don’t know people until you’ve lived with them” and even though we cannot “live” with the families we serve, we can better understand them when visiting with them in their home environment. The funds of knowledge framework demonstrated several benefits. Firstly, teachers began to see children and families as resourceful and strength-filled (Moll, 2005; Moll & González, 1994). Secondly, stronger connections were created with parents (Moll et al., 1992; González et al., 2005). Thirdly, reciprocity was reached, increasingly valuing parents and their children (González, 2005; González et al., 1995).

Later on in the presentation, I will introduce Jenny and draw correlations between her newfound self-esteem and Moll’s funds of knowledge framework.”

Parent Involvement Models

Comer's model for reforming education



Video found at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AUvmhizC8

Speaking Notes

“In 1968, Comer accepted a challenge to positively influence the outcomes for children of predominately poor African American families attending an elementary school reputed to have poor attendance, poor academic outcomes, and tense relationships between children, educators and parents (Comer et al., 1996). Comer et al. (1996) described the situation he encountered as highly stressed parents, low expectations from teachers, and mistrustful home-school relationships resulting in academic failure for children.

In the video, you will be introduced to Comer and his thoughts on the importance of children’s home and learning experiences. After the video, I will present some of Comer’s work with families in schools and the outcomes achieved.”

“Focused on building trusting relationships between children, teachers and parents along with providing a welcoming atmosphere, Comer enticed parents to become involved in the school, contributing to the education of their children. Within three years, parent turnout to one event increased from 15 to 400 (Comer, 2005).

The philosophy confirmed “student academic performance, behavior, and preparation for school and life can be greatly improved when the adult stakeholders work together in respectful, collaborative ways to create a school climate or culture that supports development, good instruction, and academic learning” (Comer, 2005, p. 40).

Strategies to move parents from ‘missing’ to engaged included: intentionally providing opportunities to encourage teacher/parent interactions; making transportation, child care and food accessible; involving parents in the planning of school events; inviting parents to participate on a parent team; providing a variety of opportunities for parent involvement; implementing increased focus on student achievement, student engagement and teacher development; and, instituting and implementing guiding principles to build a caring and inclusive learning environment (Comer et al., 1996).

In a reflection on his life’s work, Comer (2009) revealed that change occurred slowly but noted change did occur. Comer pointed out that children and parents increasingly felt they belonged, positive relationships were established between home and school, and children experienced positive post-secondary outcomes.”

Parent Involvement Models
(continued)

Epstein's model of six types of family involvement

A Venn diagram with three overlapping circles labeled FAMILY, SCHOOL, and COMMUNITY. The circles overlap in the center and at the intersections between two circles. A small citation '(Epstein, 2011, p. 22)' is located at the bottom right of the diagram.

Speaking Notes

“Epstein (2011) emphasized the value of partnerships between schools, families and communities, naming each a sphere of influence for children. Epstein (2011) urged educators to value the interconnectedness of each sphere and its contribution to the development of a child.

Epstein (2011) recognized that children naturally move in and out of each sphere, and the closer each sphere works together, the better school outcomes children are likely to achieve.

To flesh out how families, schools and communities can work together toward optimal outcomes for children, Epstein (2011) introduced six ways schools can involve and support family involvement, namely; supporting and teaching positive parenting practices; communicating openly with families and inviting their input; offering parents volunteer opportunities; teaching parents supportive home learning practices; extending decision making opportunities at school to parents; and, inviting the community to build relationships with schools and families.

Epstein (2010) shared that relationships between families and schools are not always smooth sailing, however, addressing the challenges and building communication and resolution processes can serve to strengthen relationships.”

Parent Involvement Models (continued)

Landy and Menna's Integrative Approach with Multi-Risk Families

The book cover features a photograph of a young child's face, looking down. The title 'EARLY INTERVENTION with MULTI-RISK FAMILIES' is written in bold, uppercase letters. Below the title, it says 'An Integrative Approach'. At the bottom, the authors' names 'Robert Landy & Bronwen Menna' are listed.

Speaking Notes

“Landy and Menna (2006) challenged service providers to “shift from perceiving families as being hard to reach, to thinking about what makes the service that is being offered hard to accept for a particular family” (p. 180). Their challenge placed the onus on service providers to scrutinize their services for goodness of fit for families and invited providers to adjust services to suit the strengths and needs of families seeking/requiring intervention.

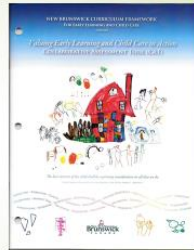
Noting the high rates of refusal to participate accompanied by high drop-out rates, Landy and Menna (2006) suggested a tailored, integrative approach to early intervention services with families deemed to have multi-risks. The integrated approach included an evaluation of the family’s readiness to be involved; an assessment of the family’s strengths and risk factors; a review of the theoretical approaches to inform the work with the family; a scan of the accessible services available to the family; the creation and monitoring of an intervention plan; and, a plan to stabilize and maintain progress (Landy & Menna, 2006).

Landy and Menna (2006) shared a comprehensive list of reasons families are reluctant to engage in services or drop out once services have been initiated. The authors divided the reasons into two categories, pragmatic and attitudinal (p. 181).”

(Share pragmatic and attitudinal reasons)

Curriculum and Pedagogical Framework

The NB Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English



Speaking Notes

“The NB Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English (2008) was created for home-based and centre-based early learning and child care as well community based programs working with parents and children.

The value for parental involvement is evident throughout this curriculum framework and in its five support documents.

The statement, “educators at child care centres have a responsibility to cultivate strong reciprocal relationships with families” (Early Childhood Centre, UNB, 2008, p. 11) is one of many statements that places the responsibility on educators to invite parents to co-construct curriculum and have influence on their child’s away-from-home environment.

Congruent with Moll’s funds of knowledge framework, educators are asked to become familiar with, and demonstrate value for the strengths of families (Elliot, Ashton, Hunt & Nason, 2011). Support document, Our Youngest Children: Learning and Caring with Infants and Toddlers stresses valuing families and getting to know their strengths (Elliot et al., 2011).

In the Communications and Literacies support document, Rose and Whitty (2010) discuss listening to families, getting to know their unique home learning environments and provide examples of how to include families’ first languages in early learning and child care environments. Play and Playfulness, a third support document, includes a story of how a father influenced play with a hunting theme, sparking dramatic play with children and inviting many parents and community members to share their knowledge and talents (Ashton, Stewart, Hunt, Nason & Scheffel, 2009). Diversity and Social Responsibility, a fourth support document, adopts a rights-based approach to the involvement of families, stresses the importance of democratic practices, and shares examples of ways to include all families (Ashton, Hunt, Nason & Whitty, 2010). Lastly, the support document Well-Being invites educators to build welcoming and inclusive environments for all families, adopting practices to reflect each child’s family in the early learning and child care environment (Ashton, Hunt & White, 2008).

The NB Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English (2008), recognizing that relationships between educators and parents are sometimes contentious, offers practical advice for educators including searching for common ground, communicating without bias, and demonstrating value for each other.”

(Note: Copies of the framework and support document will be on view and will be pointed out as information is presented.)

Part 2 Literature Review

Identified Barriers to Parental Engagement

- Lack of transportation (Avis, Bulman and Leighton, 2007)
- Lack of child care (Haggerty, Fleming, Lonczak, Oxford, Harachi & Catalano, 2002; Lueder, 2011)
- Scheduling conflicts (Mendez et al., 2009; Underwood & Killoran, 2012)
- Competing demands on parents' time (Barnes, MacPherson & Senior, 2006; Coe et al., 2007)
- Lack of trust (Barlow et al., 2005; Underwood & Killoran, 2012)

Speaking Notes

“Through an extensive review of research studies, a multitude of barriers were identified that potentially contributed to parents’ reluctance to become involved in services or to the high dropout rate once services had been initiated.

Avis, Bulman and Leighton (2007), in their study of parent participation in Sure Start programs, identified **lack of transportation** as a major barrier to parent participation. Simply put, parents did not have means to get to the programs and thus, did not attend. Lack of transportation was identified multiple times as a practical reason parents were “missing” (Coe et al., 2008; Mendez, Carpenter, LaForett & Cohen, 2009; Taylor, Mills, Schmied, Dahlen, Shuiringa & Hudson, 2012). Another practical and often cited reason for non-attendance was **lack of child care** (Haggerty, Fleming, Lonczak, Oxford, Harachi & Catalano, 2002; Lueder, 2011). In a study of two Head Start programs in New York, Lamb-Parker, Piotrkowski, Baker, Kessler-Sklar, Clark and Peay (2001) shared that parents typically had younger children at home and could not find reliable child care. **Scheduling conflicts** was noted by Mendez et al. (2009), in their study of participation in an intervention program, as a leading barrier to parental participation. This finding was supported by Underwood & Killoran (2012), recommending service providers plan programs on week nights and weekends to better suit parents’ schedules. Frequently mentioned in the literature as a barrier was **competing demands on parents’ time** (Barnes, MacPherson & Senior, 2006; Coe et al., 2008). **Lack of trust** was repeatedly mentioned as a barrier (Barlow et al., 2005; Underwood & Killoran, 2012). Parents described themselves as feeling “under surveillance” by service providers (Winkworth, McArthur, Layton, Thomson & Wilson, 2010, p. 442); mistrusting other parents (Avis et al., 2007); and preferring to seek advice or assistance from a friend or family member (Barlow et al., 2005).

Additional barriers mentioned less frequently in the literature but important to consider included **low literacy skills** of parents (Barlow et al., 2005; Garbers, Tunstill, Allnock & Akhurst, 2006); **parents not perceiving a need to be involved** (Barnes et al., 2006; Mendez et al., 2009); **parents feeling judged and/or devalued** by service providers (Taylor et al., 2012; Winkworth et al., 2010); **lack of culturally competent practices** (Underwood & Killoran, 2012); **lack of confidence** (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999); **shame and stigmatization** (Taylor et al., 2012; Winkworth et al., 2010); **not knowing about the program** (Coe et al., 2008; Winkworth et al., 2010); and **past negative experiences with similar services** (Garbers et al., 2006).”

Whole Group Question

In your experience with parents, have you encountered a barrier I have not mentioned? If so, can you share this barrier with the group?

Literature Review

Promising Practices to Increase Parental Engagement

- Practical support (Larocque et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2012)
- motional support (Axford et al., 2012; Warren, Hong, Rubin & Uy, 2009)
- Innovation (Taylor et al., 2012; Underwood & Killoran, 2012)

Speaking Notes

“Firstly, the literature was clear on **providing the practical support** -- transportation, child care, and food were most frequently mentioned (Larocque et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2012). In addition, Jack et al. (2002) mentioned offering clothing, support to attend meetings, appointments and parenting programs as well as translation services.

Secondly, **providing emotional support** was stressed. Relationship and trust building were underscored as critical to recruitment, retention and engagement of parents in parenting programs and services (Axford et al., 2012; Warren, Hong, Rubin & Uy, 2009). Commenting on the courage it takes for some parents to enter programs, Evangelou, Coxon, Smith and Chan (2013) shared “for some parents, actually taking the first step into the room can represent an enormous hurdle, one which may take several weeks or even months to overcome” (p. 133).

Thirdly, the literature encouraged **innovation**. A plethora of innovative strategies were suggested including increasing accessibility by creating neighborhood parenting hubs (Taylor et al., 2012; Underwood & Killoran, 2012); providing incentives and gifts to attend programs (Jack et al., 2002; McDonald et al., 2012); offering flexible scheduling (Henrich & Gadaire, 2008; Larocque et al., 2011) and multi-age programs enabling families to participate as a whole (Underwood & Killoran, 2012); and, providing programs that parents can access in their own home (Larocque et al., 2011).

Fourthly, the literature was clear on the need to **involve parents**. To begin with, McDonald et al. (2012) suggested including parents in decisions regarding program delivery; consulting parents to understand what they need (Barlow et al., 2005); and, asking parents frequently for feedback on all aspects of the programs (Warren et al., 2009).

Fifthly, **reflective practices** were recommended. Underwood and Killoran (2012) emphasized that parents are keenly aware of and sensitive to staff members’ ability to connect with parents and demonstrate their caring and trustworthiness.

Lastly, **persistence** pays off. Barlow et al. (2005) shared that service providers need to repeatedly offer their assistance in the hope that services will be accessed when needed by parents.”


Whole Group Question

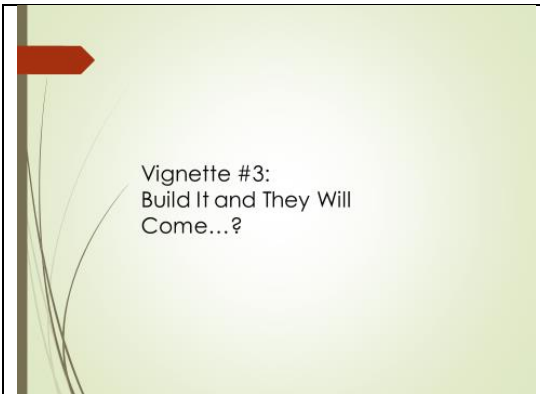
Have you encountered a promising practice I have not mentioned? If so, can you share this promising practice with the group?

Part 3
Connections to Practice

Speaking Notes

“I will now present three vignettes, situations I have experienced or am currently experiencing in my work. These vignettes demonstrate elements of parent engagement found in the literature. Once presented, I will provide an analysis and a critique of how these situations align with the knowledge gained from the theoretical frameworks and models presented in this capstone project.”

 <p>Vignette #1: Jenny</p>	<p>I will share Vignette # 1: Jenny.</p> <p><u>Speaking Notes</u></p> <p>“When I reflect back on this experience, I recognize the parents’ invitation to this mother as the catalyst to her newfound confidence. This mother’s talents went unnoticed and untapped for a year. Once unleashed, her artistic abilities were sought out over and over again, inviting her to be both a contributor to, and a receiver of, the agency’s work. González et al. (1995) advised approaching families with the intent to discover their strengths. This mother had the practical support to participate in the early intervention program, however, practical support was not enough to realize her full engagement. Looking back with what I now know, I would have advocated a greater focus on utilizing a strength-based approach, finding the families’ funds of knowledge. Then, I would have worked to find opportunities to express these abilities in the best interest of the family and others, achieving the relationship reciprocity promoted in The NB Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English (2008). Secondly, in a look back with what I now know, I wonder if a ‘buddy’ program, intentionally matching experienced parents with new parents would have eased this and other parents’ entry into the program and provided additional emotional support (Avis et al., 2007; Garbers et al., 2006; McDonald et al., 2012; Warren et al., 2009). The profound difference in this mother’s demeanour is what I wish for all parents who muster up the courage to accept invitations to participate in early childhood education programs.”</p> <p><u>Whole Group Question</u></p> <p>Have you encountered a situation in your work where contributing funds of knowledge made such a profound difference to a parents?</p>
 <p>Vignette #2: Steve & Sarah</p>	<p>I will share Vignette # 2: Steve and Sarah.</p> <p><u>Speaking Notes</u></p> <p>“I bring attention to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems model as I reflect on this family’s various environments, nestled snugly inside each other, noting some boundaries and overlaps, making up their unique ecosystem. Entering this early family intervention program introduced this family to many new microsystems, including their youngest son’s new classroom, parenting groups, programs and clubs. I think of the interconnectedness between their microsystems, supporting Steve and Sarah to provide for and support their family and also, to help them realize reciprocity. I also reflect on the impact of Sarah’s work and fluctuating paycheque, explained by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as an exosystem of this family, and how destabilizing this was for them. I also applaud Steve and Sarah’s resourcefulness, burgeoning trust, and willingness to do what was necessary to make life better for their family.</p> <p>Steve and Sarah’s low educational achievement, their financial struggles, their neighborhood and some of their parenting practices placed this family at risk (Landy and Menna, 2006). However, their acceptance of an integrative approach including home visiting, parenting groups, various approaches to meet basic needs, a new neighborhood, volunteerism and a mentorship arrangement greatly strengthened this family and provided protective factors to offset risks.</p> <p>Unlike Jenny, I cannot pinpoint a certain event that had a profound influence on Steve and Sarah. Trust seemed to build slowly and steadily. Trust was recognized in the literature as a crucial element to building relationships with families (Jack et al., 2002; Underwood & Killoran, 2012). As well, a welcoming and caring environment, a variety of opportunities to build relationships between educators and parents, and invitations to collaborate are all approaches advocated by Comer (1996) and employed by this agency. Open communication, opportunities for volunteerism, and building positive parenting practices were recognized by Epstein (2011) as essential for parental engagement and these elements also were at play with Steve and Sarah. In the end, I applaud Steve and Sarah for their courage to abandon their apprehension and embrace new ideas and experiences in the best interests of their entire family.”</p> <p><u>Pair/Share Activity</u></p> <p>Discuss with a partner how the building of trust is crucial to establishing relationships between service providers and parents and your practices to build trust with families.</p>



Vignette #3:
Build It and They Will
Come...?

I will share Vignette # 3: Build It and They Will Come...?

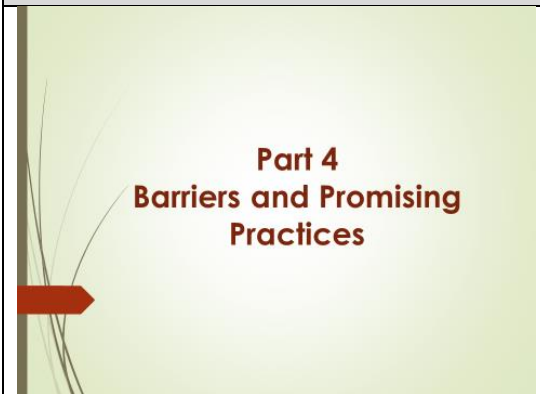
Speaking Notes

“The lacklustre response from parents was not surprising to me, though surprising the early childhood educators involved in the project. The lacklustre response from parents is a challenge for our team. We have an opportunity to reflect, examine and bring change to our current practices to attract, retain and engage parents. Traditionally, our team sends out e-mail invites, publishes a calendar received by a select group, and works in partnership with other service providers to attract parents to group activities. Programs generally fill up utilizing these practices but we are certain that the parents we most wish to see are not in attendance. Attracting the “missing” parents to this new early childhood classroom requires a more comprehensive and thoughtful approach. In offering an analysis and critique of this situation, I will reflect on Landy and Menna’s (2006) question, “what makes the *service* that is being offered hard to accept for a particular family” (p. 180). Firstly, I wonder if the parents know about this early learning opportunity. A barrier mentioned in the literature was that parents did not know about the programs (Coe et al., 2008; Winkworth et al., 2010). Secondly, if the program is known, I am assuming trust has not been established. Lack of trust has been identified as a significant barrier (Barlow et al., 2005; Underwood & Killoran, 2012). Comer (1996) identified home visits with parents and networking with reputable community agencies as trust builders. Recruiting attending parents to promote the program with “missing” parents (Garbers et al., 2006); offering incentives to attend (Jack et al., 2002); creating non-threatening family fun events (Garbers et al., 2006); and, consulting with the parents currently in attendance regarding their needs and obtaining their feedback is a start to attracting and building the trust necessary to retain and engage parents (Barlow et al., 2005; Warren et al., 2009). Thirdly, Epstein (2011) advocated action teams to build partnerships between schools, families and communities. Fourthly, parents have their own funds of knowledge to contribute as a resource to the program. Getting to know what these are and inviting parents to share their funds of knowledge leads to strong, trusting and reciprocal relationships with parents (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

Lastly, attracting, retaining and engaging parents requires continuous effort and reflection. Persistence is recommended (Barlow et al., 2005; Barnes et al., 2006; Garbers et al., 2006).”

Pair/Share Activity

Thinking about what was discussed so far, what are some additional ways we can attract and engage parents in this new early childhood space?



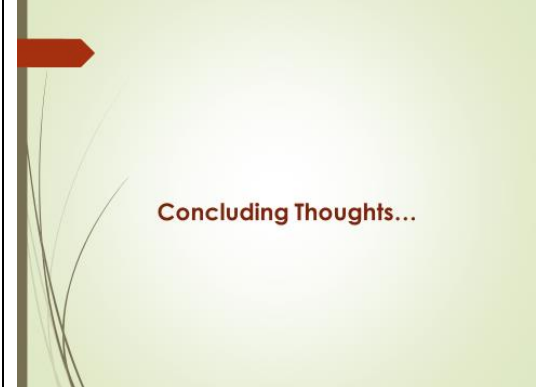
Part 4
Barriers and Promising
Practices

Pair/Share Activity

“I ask that you choose a partner and discuss the following question.”

Question

In what way has this presentation inspired you -- or not -- to change or add a practice to attract “missing” parents to your programs/services? If so, what would that be?



Speaking Notes

“Three ideas that stayed with me throughout the capstone journey. Firstly, Moll’s funds of knowledge and how we can achieve a levelling relationship with families and realize relationship reciprocity. Secondly, a question asked by Landy and Menna (2006, p. 180) is one I encourage you to ask:
What makes the *service* that is being offered hard to accept for a particular family?

And lastly, I want to recognize the **courage** it takes to enter into a new situation or have a stranger enter your home – we need to reflect on how it might/does feel for us and applaud and appreciate all the families that enter our doors or that we enter theirs.”



Speaking Notes

“I thank you all for attending and participating. I enjoyed not only the journey of this capstone, but the journey of working toward an M.Ed in Early Childhood. I look forward to our continued work together.”



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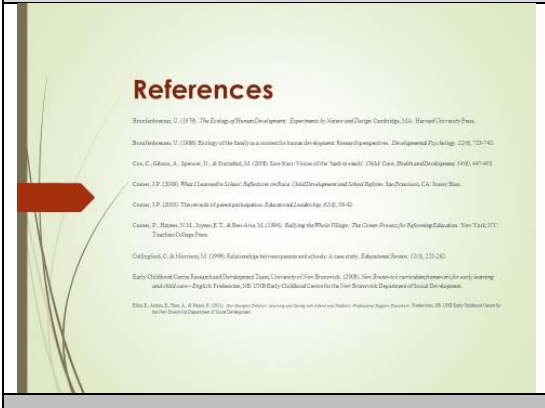
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